

தமிழ் தேசிய அரங்கு

TAMIL NATIONAL FORUM

Selected Writings - Dharmeratnam Sivaram (Taraki)

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"..the conduct of modern warfare is not only about troops, weapons, generals and battlefields - it is also about perceptions. The manner in which a war is perceived by states and their populations today can have a strategic impact on its conduct..." *Dharmeratnam Sivaram, One Hundred Tamils of 20th Century*

2005...

Ceasefire Agreement Year IV 2005 - 2006

Ceasefire Agreement Year III 2004-2005

22 February 2005 | War Remains an Option Three Years After Cease-fire

2004...

paramilitaries like the right wing AUC that controls large areas in Columbia and terrorizes peasants who support FARC, the main Marxist guerrilla organisation fighting the state in that country. The AUC is estimated to be about ten thousand strong. It plays a key role in the Columbian military's counter insurgency campaign against FARC...	
15 August 2004	[REDACTED]
8 August 2004	[REDACTED] - [REDACTED] ; [REDACTED]
4 August 2004	<u>ISGA entails concepts and structures of final solution</u> "The peace process has reached an absolute deadlock. But all parties involved in the attempt to make permanent peace in Sri Lanka - the UPFA government, the LTTE, sundry conflict resolution experts and the Norwegians - continue to say nice things. There is no doubt that the ceasefire is there to stay for a while despite the killings, attacks and the renegade factor. But the peace process (if one may still call it so) is at a dead-end..."
25 July 2004	[REDACTED]
27 July 2004	[REDACTED]?
21 July 2004	<u>Strategic positioning vital for military advantage</u>
19 July 2004	[REDACTED]
14 July 2004	<u>Can the renegade Karuna deliver his Big Magic?</u> "...Life goes on as usual in Batticaloa town and in its interior. The Army has stepped up patrols and occasional checks on the main roads of the town. But no one appears to be too hassled by this. But whenever I run into friend acquaintances or relatives, they invariably tell me that I am foolish to be back. "You would be shot dead like Nadesan. Leave now", they say. But Batticaloa is my home. This is where I was born and grew up. This is the only place in this wide world where the evening air is sweetly suffused with memories of the girls whom I once loved in the bars where I made merry in my first heady forays into manhood. This has been my home despite years of a deadly internecine war between the LTTE and another Tamil militant organisation to which I belonged, despite years of threats posed by the (formerly) much-feared 'Razeek Group', despite the dire uncertainties of life in the east during Eelam War III. (I am a reluctant sojourner of Colombo)..."
7 July 2004	<u>Karuna affair: The military connection</u>
May/June 2004	<u>Audio-Video Presentation on Himself & his Work</u> German Human Rights Server Interview with Sivaram Dharmeratnam , May/June 2004 "Mr. Sivaram Dharmeratnam is well known for his role in the web site tamilnet.com . He spoke to us about his work and the repression faced by Tamil journalists a few days before his colleague Mr. Aiyathurai Nadesan was assassinated in the east of the island - the first 5 clips are of this interview. Part 6 was made after Mr Nadesan was murdered." Part 1 - Part 2 - Part 3 - Part 4 - Part 5 - Part 6
29 May 2004	<u>India will not court regional instability by taking on Tigers</u> "...It is also obvious that no western power has been able to manipulate the Tigers despite the presence of large Tamil Diaspora communities in the developed countries. The lesson that Colombo refuses to learn from the Indian intervention in 1983-87 is that Delhi's primary concern in Sri Lanka is to preclude outside powers from strategically positioning themselves on this island in a manner detrimental to its interests here. Therefore as long as the LTTE does not actively promote separatist sentiments in Tamil Nadu and as long as the LTTE refuses to become a pawn in the hands of outside powers, India may not find reasons compelling enough to do what many southern politicians and opinion makers would want it to do against the Tigers..."

22 May 2004

[LTTE develops asymmetric deterrence to stall foreign intervention](#)

When the Tigers say that the balance of forces between the Sri Lankan military and their armed forces sustains the ceasefire they mean that it is their military power that deters the Sri Lankan state from considering war as the chief means of dealing with the conflict despite the overwhelming Sinhala sentiment in favour of doing so. Here deterrence is not based on symmetry of military power on either side. Actually there is an asymmetry if one calculates the armed strength of the Sri Lankan state and that of the LTTE in terms of their military assets and access to war resources... Yet the LTTE has been able to achieve strategic parity of military force with the Sri Lankan state. The LTTE did this by pooling all its resources to launch a relentless assault on the military forces that the GOSL had disproportionately concentrated in the north between 1995-1999. This neutralised the defensive and offensive capability and debilitated the resolve of the main component of the Sri Lankan ground forces, which were massed in Jaffna and the Vanni. However, the GOSL's resolve to continue the war was finally broken when the LTTE hit Katunayaka..."

14 March 2004

[□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□](#)

13 January 2004

[Indo-Lanka Defence Cooperation Agreement: A matter of routine](#)

Ceasefire Agreement Year II 2003-2004

4 February 2004

[Is Sri Lanka Truly Sovereign?](#)

27 January 2004

[LTTE will negotiate only with Parity of Military Status](#)

"I formulated the concept of the balance of forces between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan armed forces as the basis of the ceasefire agreement in a paper presented at a conference in Switzerland in April 2002. (Lt. Gen. Gerry de Silva) presented the Army's point of view. But Chatham House rules prevent me from discussing details of the matter here. I argued that the LTTE leadership decided to start negotiations with the Government of Sri Lanka because they were unequivocally satisfied by December 2000 that they had achieved a strategic parity with the Sri Lankan armed forces and were in a position to sustain that parity, barring an overwhelming and sustained external military intervention... Here one should emphasise that the **Tigers consider military power first and foremost as a means to negotiate political ends**. To negotiate effectively one should have a clear understanding of the 'negotiating behaviour' of one's opponent...."

2003...

13 June 2003

[Tokyo & the Cost of the Unitary State's Internal Colonialism](#)

5 May 2003

[The folly of Eelam punditry](#)

2002...

Ceasefire Agreement Year I: 2002-2003

19 December 2002

[What is India's stand on the peace process?](#)

"...The US led coalition is doing the job of trying to settle the conflict through Norway. And Delhi is assured of keeping abreast of the developments by virtue of its legal status vis-à-vis the Tamil question which is guaranteed by the Indo Lanka Accord. We must not forget India has come to wield such decisive say on Sri Lanka's strategic status in the region by managing and mediating Tamil militancy between 1983 and 1987 in its so called attempt to settle the ethnic conflict here. The US and its allies are doing exactly the same here now, though by subtler means. It is obvious to everyone that they are not making peace for peace's sake. There is nothing called a free lunch in international diplomacy and power politics. Therefore, India may just keep watching the peace process and blessing it towards fruition as long as it does not give the US coalition great leverage in the affairs of the island – the kind of leverage that could undermine what Delhi feels are its "non negotiable strategic interests" in Sri Lanka..."

29 November 2002

[Sinhala nationalists should rejoice](#)

	<p>"Sinhala nationalists should rejoice now rather than gripe and whine ad nauseam that Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and his men have perfidiously betrayed the Singhalese people to the LTTE. The world's sole superpower has reiterated its commitment to firmly support the Sri Lankan state to stop the LTTE from undermining its sovereignty. Richard Armitage could not have been more lucid when he called on the LTTE to renounce violence and to accept the authority of the Sri Lankan state in all parts of the island..."</p>
28 November 2002	Creeping pogrom against Muslims in the South
21 November 2002	LTTE's law and order machinery: drawing the line
31 October 2002	<p>HSZ renders Jaffna IDPs in vulnerable position</p> <p>A US state department official who visited Jaffna after it was captured by the army said that the peninsula provided a window of opportunity for reconstruction and development. Even today there is much hype about rebuilding Chavakachcheri, Jaffna town, improving telecommunication facilities, roads and tourism in the north. Thousands of tourists from the south visit Jaffna today. Ministers and diplomats come and go. New banks and insurance companies from the south have started business in Jaffna and are reporting handsome profits already. Business seems to thrive. Flashy new Indian motorbikes are on the roads everywhere. All this leaves the impression in one's mind that Jaffna is almost fine. Little would the average visitor know that there are thousands of refugees living in run down refugee camps amid squalor and official negligence. This is the other side of Jaffna, a reality that the government pretends not to see..."</p>
24 October 2002	A Hidden Hand behind Akkaraipattu Incidents
17 October 2002	<p>"There is a simple formula today for bringing down the UNF government by manipulating Muslim politics. One can precipitate a crisis in the east by instigating Muslims to protest against the LTTE. Then build on the crisis to make it difficult for the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress to remain in the UNF. Or, prod the SLMC or sections of it to make demands that the LTTE and the UNF cannot meet at this juncture. The incidents that led to the Police clamping a local curfew in the Akkaraipattu – Addalaichenai towns on the southeastern coast should also be scrutinised in this light..."</p>
3 October 2002	Rumour as weapon
21 September 2002	Demobilising is Irrelevant to Peace
6 September 2002	International Safety Net - You can't have the cake and eat it
	<p>There are no permanent alliances but only permanent interests that inform the affairs between states. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe appears to be sure of an international safety net to deter the LTTE from going back to war. In securing this safety net, he is attempting to do what many consider impossible in international politics. He is getting the support of countries whose strategic interests in this part of the world are diametrically opposed and hence in conflict. Can Mr. Wickremesinghe and his team of peace negotiators have the cake and eat it as well?</p>
24 August 2002	The East: LTTE's Achilles Heel or Military Asset?

The Hindu newspaper's Sambandan asked what was in my view the most useful question at Prabhaharan's press conference in Kilinochchi on March 10. Clearly Sambandan did not realise the import of his question at the time. "What would you consider the greatest military challenge that you had to ever face?" was his question. The LTTE leader pondered the matter for some time... the Tiger leader after the long pregnant pause said it was Op. Jeya Sikurui....The answer was Prabhaharan's unique way of acknowledging to the world the importance of Karuna, the eastern commander who was seated by his side at the press conference. Karuna was the overall commander of the LTTE's defensive operations and counter offensives against Jaya Sikurui. It was Karuna who commanded the LTTE forces that drove the army out of the Vanni..."

2001...

Eelam War III 1995-2002

23 November 2001

[Western Mediation: How effective can it be?](#)

"...persuading or coercing the LTTE into a dialogue is not the primary role that Colombo expects the west to play in resolving the conflict. The PA (the UNP and the JVP too), first of all, wants the western governments to arrest and deport known LTTE activists in their countries. Secondly, it wants them to ban the organisation as India and the US have done. And thirdly it urges them to stop the Tigers from collecting money. The LTTE has learnt from its Indian sojourn that all foreign hosts are invariably inclined, for very pragmatic reasons, to view its assets on their soil including manpower as the means by which they may eventually be able to exert diplomatic pressure on the organisation...."

2000...

13 December 2000

[What is really wrong with the counter insurgency methods?](#)

"Western counter insurgency methods have succeeded in putting down or effectively containing the armed struggle for social emancipation or for carving out separate states in the majority of the countries which adopted them under the tutelage of the Americans and the British. This is a fact that more often than not is buried by the third world's persistent fascination with the success stories of Vietnam and Cuba. The American and British governments have spent vast resources to study and constantly improve on their common and specific counter insurgency methods unlike the Cubans or the Vietnamese whose cash strapped economies would brook no such luxuries..."

19 October 2000

[Lanka's climbing war budget gets diminishing returns](#)

1999...

1 December 1999

[Towards a rigorous election campaign: Can CBK get the minority vote?](#)

22 May 1999

[Media Bias and Censorship in Conflict Reporting in Sri Lanka](#)

9th May 1999

[Tigers short of manpower ?](#)

2 May 1999

[Whispers of conspiracy find hot market](#)

25 April 1999

[Tiger hunt: Delhi's changing faces](#)

11 April 1999

[PA can't have it and eat it](#)

4 April 1999

[Kosovo strikes stir Eelam lobby](#)

21 March 1999

[Eelam War: Growing more complex](#)

14 March 1999

[Suspicion and mistrust, reality of Jaffna](#)

21 February 1999

[Where the bold dare to tread](#)

14 February 1999	Towards a global Tamil village on internet
7 March 1999	Relations with Chennai will continue to trouble
3 March 1999	So why did the chicken cross the road?
17 January 1999	Those who wear the Tiger mask
10 January 1999	What the cats missed...
3 January 1999	Did President meet Gopalasamy?

1998...

27 December 1998	The year ahead, a tough story all over again
20 December 1998	Rations: the ludicrousness of logic
13 December 1998	The PA angel and a diabolical Tiger
29 November 1998	TULF: Stage set for new leadership
25 November 1998	Diplomatic Safari in S. Africa: Tiger-hunt in quagmire
18 November 1998	War is far from over - Whats behind LTTE's recent recruitment drive?

"The LTTE's recent recruitment drive provided another opportunity for predictions about the organisation and its intentions. Those who nurture an inveterate hatred for the Tigers on either side of the Palk Strait, saw in the recruitment campaign a desperate bid for survival, a pathetic attempt to replenish the ranks depleted by Op. Unceasing Waves II. The Hindustan Times which seems to have developed a penchant for gleefully insisting that Tamil cause has run out of steam, described the Kilinochchi attack as "a flash in the pan" for the LTTE struggling it were on its last legs..."

22 March 1998	LTTE moves on despite global isolation
8 March 1998	Tamil question knocking on the doors of Delhi
22 February 1998	Changing strategies and Kilinochchi gamble
15 February 1998	The Operation Checkmate in Kilinochchi – LTTE style
8 February 1998	The deepening theatre of operation - the Kilinochchi factor
25 January 1998	'Curiouser and curiouser'
11 January 1998	Jaffna: still on paper
4 January 1998	Why Prabha would reduce resistance

1997...

21 December 1997	Jaffna: where nothing is certain!
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14 December 1997	Is there a future for the moderates?
7 December 1997	The scramble for candidates begins!
23 November 1997	Creeping advantage: can the government hold on to it?
16 November 1997	Counter- offensive quagmire in Jaffna
9 November 1997	LTTE takes battle to the US courts
2 November 1997	Tailing the Tiger trap
12 October 1997	Battle on A9: a battered theory of war
5 October 1997	Package won't work
27 July 1997	Ten years after the Indo-Lanka Accord: not even the 'kovnam'
29 June 1997	Blinded in the Wanni quagmire
22 June 1997	These people have little choice
15 June 1997	The bloody lessons of Thandikulam
11 June 1997	To hell with the environment
8 June 1997	'Surprise' in Prabha's strategy
25 May 1997	Geographical dimension of Operation Jaya Sikurui
11 May 1997	UNP ponders direct talks with LTTE?
4 May 1997	Sojourn to Vanni tells all
May 1997	The Cat, a Bell and a Few Strategists "Many arguments about the best and most effective way of defeating or suppressing armed Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka have been ventured in earnest since the beginning of the Eelam War almost fourteen years ago. The latest of these can be stated thus: 'The LTTE's recruitment base is showing clear signs of diminishing such as the fact that they are relying more and more on women and children for new recruits. This is an irreversible trend given the social and economic realities of the northeast, whereas the army can continue to draw recruits from a population which is at least sixty percent larger than the one on which the Tigers have to depend. Furthermore, the total strength of the Tigers being one tenth or slightly higher than that of the army, manpower losses which they sustain in battles will have ten times the impact such losses can have on the security forces. Therefore, 'manpower' shortages will, in the foreseeable future, impel the LTTE to abandon the military option or reduce it to an insignificant and marginal guerrilla organization.'..."
6 April 1997	Tigers think: Why talk, when we are riding high
23 March 1997	All roads don't lead to Jaffna
9 March 1997	Forward march, many more miles to go yet
1996...	
20 October 1996	After Prabha: question of succession
6 October 1996	LTTE has own 'medical corps'
29 September	EPDP goes on offensive

1996	
15 September 1996	Playing roulette with interim council
8 September 1996	Govt. clings on despite stiff opposition
18 August 1996	Tussle for Titanium
11 August 1996	Target Prabha
4 August 1996	Nine years on, nothing to show
28 July 1996	Unceasing waves unleash terror unknown
30 June 1996	Playing politics with the Package
16 June 1996	PA's new bank
9 June 1996	UNP gives nod for greater devolution?
2 June 1996	Pacification: key to end war
26 May 1996	Alliance plays politics with Tamil parties
19 May 1996	In search of solution but with honour
12 May 1996	Tamil Nadu Connection, Again
21 April 1996	<p>Riviresa II and opening up of the 8th front</p> <p>"One year has gone by since the LTTE began Eelam War Three on April 19, 1995. The major operation to capture Vadamaradchi and Thenmaradchi has begun. The Tigers have withdrawn all their bases from the region leaving behind a large number of attack groups which will harass the army once it has established its positions there. An assessment of the first year of Eelam War Three will give an indication where things would be headed once the Vadamaradchi-Thenmaradchi operation is complete..."</p>
7 April 1996	Give up east, at what cost?
31 March 1996	How free is the East today ?
3 March 1996	<p>Game Plan for a Grand Slam</p> <p>"..Deputy Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte has said that the war would be brought to an end by April this year. It is clear from the actions and statements of the Tigers that they have more or less assumed that the next major operation in Jaffna would be into the southern part of Thenmarachchi with a view to cutting off the peninsula from the mainland completely - a large scale version of Operation Yal Devi. (The LTTE's International Secretariat claimed recently that the government is delaying the operation because some senior officers in the army are reluctant to sanction it). It is also evident that the LTTE is not going to resist the offensive. It has pulled out almost all its vital military assets from both Vadamarachchi and Thenmarachchi and seems to be digging in for a long haul in the region..."</p>
1994...	
9 October 1994	Thondaman's Dilemma
15 May 2004	Govt's Counter-Insurgency Programme and LTTE's Military Response
8 May 1994	The Exclusive Right to Write Eelam History

1993...

15 June 1993

[What went wrong between the Tigers and Premadasa](#)**1992...****Eelam War II 1990-1995**

1 May 1992	On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay - Part 1 Origins and Dispersion in South India and Sri Lanka "Tamil nationalism in South India and Sri Lanka can be described in terms of two sets of ideas and beliefs. The one, the purity and uniqueness of Tamil language and culture; the other, Tamil traditions which exalt military virtues and ideals..." more
15 May 1992	On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay - Part 2 Tamil Military Castes "...For many years, until he became chief minister, Karunanidhi wrote under the pen-name Maravan. His weekly letter to party cadres was known as Maravan Madal – the Maravan's epistle. Tamil militarism thus became integral to the Dravidian movement..." more
1 June 1992	On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay - Part 3 Tamil Militarism – The Code of Suicide "Pulla Vazhkai Vallan Pakkam – the martial attitude of the warrior who goes forth into suicidal battle is mentioned by Tholkappiyam. The other works refer to it as <i>Thannai Vettal</i> . Duarte Barbosa describes the practice among the Nayar (of the Chera kingdom). It was later noticed by British officials as well. It was also prevalent among the Maravar (of the Pandya kingdom) from whom the suicidal <i>Aapathuthavi</i> bodyguard was selected." more
1 July 1992	On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay - Part 4 Militarism and caste in Jaffna "Tamil secessionism and Tamil militarism are two sides of the same coin. Both are legacies of the attempt by the British to demilitarize Tamil society in the 19th century. Tamil militarism arose from the grievances of the disfranchised Tamil military castes. Tamil secession was the result of the political ambitions of the classes which were promoted by the British to consolidate the gains of demartialization. Therefore it is necessary to understand the colonial strategies which were aimed at depriving the traditional power and status of the Tamil martial castes in Tamil society." more
15 July 1992	On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay - Part 5 The suppression of Tamil military castes "...One of the first concerns of the British as soon as they conquered the southern parts of India was with the ancient and ingrained "habits of predatory war" among the Tamils. The extirpation of these "habits" and culture was considered essential in establishing their authority in Tamil society. The Tamil region was ceded to the British in July 1801; a proclamation was issued by them in December the same year, whereby the use of arms was suppressed and the military service traditionally rendered by the Tamil military castes was abolished..." more
1 August 1992	On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay - Part 6 Bishop Caldwell and the Tamil Dravidians "Robert Caldwell (1819-1891) was the father of the Dravidian movement. He was the Bishop of Tinnevelly – the heartland of the Maravar Poligars – during the times when the British were engaged in suppressing the Tamil military castes in the Tamil region...The intention of this study however is to show that the fundamental tenets of the nascent phase of Dravidian ideology were essentially linked to the political and cultural legacies of the British attempt to demilitarize Tamil society. The writings of Bishop Caldwell presuppose a teleological project which was not uncommon to which were conceived as great intellectual undertakings in that era of empire building..." more
15 August 1992	On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay - Part 7 The Tamil Soldier and the Dravidian Diaspora
1 September 1992	On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay - Part 8 The Twin Narratives of Tamil Nationalism
1 October 1992	On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay - Part 9 [Subramanya] Bharathy and the Legitimation of Militarism
1 November 1992	On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay - Part 10 Warrior Sons and Mothers
15 November 1992	On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay - Part 11 The Legend of Cheran Senguttuvan together with Post Script Sachi Sri Kantha on the Significance of Sivaram's study on the Maravar Caste and Tamil Militarism, 6 May 2005
15 November 1992	LTTE's Eelam Project and the Muslim People
30 July 1992	Counter-civilian strategies

10 June 1992	SL Government's speak soft, hit hard policy
7 June 1992	Govt.'s Dual Strategy Against the Tigers
31 May 1992	Can Indians wipe out LTTE
23 May 1992	The ban on LTTE and Tamil Nadu politics
20 March 1992	LTTE admits it holds political prisoners
3 March 1992	LTTE gearing up for battle of Jaffna

1991...

1 November 1991	On Cutting off Supply Lines
12 September 1991	Future of Tamil Nadu Politics
31 July 1991	The LTTE's New Concept- Confederation
12 June 1991	War and Peace- LTTE way
9 June 1991	The Government has to talk to the LTTE at Some Point of Time
19 May 1991	Coercive Airpower in the Eelam Conflict

1990...

Eelam War I, Indo-Eelam War 1976-1987, 1987-1990

6 May 1990	On Vadamarachchi & Anton Balasingham
14 March 1990	The Idea of Eelam
18 February 1990	Karunanidhi's Novel: Payum Puli Pandara Vanniyan
3 December 1989	Tigers two pronged strategy
29 October 1989	Waning importance of the rearbase in Tamil Nadu

Selected Writings by Dharmeratnam Sivaram (Taraki)

On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay

Part 1: Origins and Dispersion in South India and Sri Lanka

Lanka Guardian, [pp.7-8 & 11]
 [prepared by [Sachi Sri Kantha](#), for electronic record]
 1 May 1992

Front Note by Sachi Sri Kantha -

I have transcribed the original material of D.P.Sivaram, without altering the content's length. Only the obvious type-setting slips and related printer's devils have been corrected. Any idiosyncratic spelling in the names of persons and places in the text also have been revised to

conventional patterns, for ease in reading. But these alterations are minimal in number. Phrases which appear in bold font in the text, are as in the original. When clarity is needed, I have added words, numbers or initials within parenthesis marked by [] at appropriate locations. Though somewhat unconventional and irregular, I have retained the original foot-note patterns of the author and his citation style of references within parentheses, as it had appeared in the Lanka Guardian in 1992.

The assembly of foot-notes by Sivaram in the series provide indirect evidence that he wrote the eleven segments, as and when time permitted; thus the series had not been ‘completed’, when it began to appear in print. In one of the foot-notes for part 2 of the series, Sivaram had noted that “I began this study in 1990”. The editorial annotation at the beginning of the part 1 stated the credentials of Sivaram as: “The writer, a well known journalist, is widely regarded as an authority on the rise of Tamil militancy.” For completeness and for showing how the author defended his views expressed in the text and also how he accommodated valid criticism, five critical comments by the readers [M.Raja Joganathan, Sachi Sri Kantha, R.B.Diulweva, C.R.A.Hoole and T.Vanniasingham] are also inserted in chronological sequence, as they had appeared in the Lanka Guardian.



Introduction

Tamil nationalism in South India and Sri Lanka can be described in terms of two sets of ideas and beliefs. The one, the purity and uniqueness of Tamil language and culture; the other, Tamil traditions which exalt military virtues and ideals. These ideals and beliefs have dominated the vocabulary of anti-Hindi and secessionist agitations and propaganda of the Dravidian movement in South India in the [19]50's and [19]60's. The nationalism of the movement for Tamil language rights and regional autonomy in Sri Lanka was articulated in the same vocabulary after 1956.

The LTTE's nationalism is also expressed in terms of these two sets of ideas and beliefs. But militarism – the spirit which exalts military virtues and ideals – has been the dominant and characterizing component of the LTTE's Tamil nationalism from its inception. The stated aim of the Tigers is to build a modern military structure.(1) The ideology of militarism plays an important role in their effort to create an efficient and advanced military organization. Therefore, in addition to standard modern methods of discipline, organization and training the LTTE inculcates the belief among its cadres – and propagates the idea among Tamils – that it is part of an ancient and powerful martial tradition, to develop and sustain a motivated and fierce fighting force.

The Tiger symbol is considered the most important manifestation of this tradition. ‘Prabhakaran had a reason for selecting the Tigers as the national insignia of Thamilzh Eelam. The Tiger insignia is an image rooted in Dravidian civilization. It is a symbol that illustrates the martial history (Veera varalaru) and national upheaval of the Tamils. Our national flag is the symbol of the independent state of Thamizh Eelam to be created, rooted in the martial traditions (Veera marapuhal) of the Tamils.’(2)

How is the LTTE able to thus define its militarism as being rooted in “Dravidian civilization” and Tamil traditions whereas the Sri Lankan Tamils have usually projected their cultural ethos as one which made them a community devoted to education, government employment, commerce and agriculture? Tamil politicians and intellectuals have in fact claimed that Tamil militancy arose from a perceived threat to these avenues of social advancement. The LTTE's militarist definition of Tamilian identity is possible because Tamil militarism is an unexamined but important feature of Tamil culture and nationalism.

This study therefore intends to examine Tamil politics in South India and Sri Lanka by addressing to questions,

(a) What is Tamil militarism?

(b) What were the social and political conditions of its genesis and diffusion in South India and Sri Lanka?

The Dravidian movement has been studied primarily in terms of the Brahmin-non Brahmin contradiction, in terms of the pro-British regional politics of non-Brahmin elites of South India,(3) the Pure Tamil and Self Respect movements, linguistic nationalism and secessionism.(4)

But the other important component of Tamil nationalism – its militarism has not figured in studies of the Dravidian movement.(5) This is partly attributable to the influence of a historiographic tradition that has shaped concepts of Tamil culture and society in Dravidian studies. It arose from a strong political compulsion in the nascent and early phases of the Dravidian ideology to portray the Tamil people and their culture as peaceful and unwarlike.

Maraimalai Atikal, the father of the Pure Tamil movement wrote in English that, “as we come to the study the life of the ancient Tamils from their most ancient literary work, I mean the Tolkappiyam, the age of which on the best internal evidence goes back to 1,500 B.C., we see them already settled into a highly civilized community for the most part peaceful, but for a few infrequent feuds between one Tamil King and another. It is to this continuity of a peaceful and highly civilized life enjoyed by the Tamils that we owe the existence of the Tamil language still in its pristine purity, vigour and glory.”(6)

Maraimalai Atikal’s views are representative of the early Dravidian movement. We can see that, the nascent Dravidian school of Tamil studies – the concepts and beliefs of which have influenced the study of the Tamil nationalism is no small measure – is marked by its patent inclination to present the history of the Tamil people as the “continuity of a peaceful and highly civilized life.”

If this was the view of the founders of the Dravidian movement, then where can one locate the ‘origins’ of Tamil militarism? Although South India in general and Tamils in particular have an insignificant place in the modern Indian army – the Madras regiment being the only unit of the southern region – the origins of Tamil militarism is closely related to the question of military and society in India.

The preponderance of north Indian peoples in the Indian army has lead to the study Indian militarism mainly as part of the evolution of society and politics in the northern parts of the subcontinent. The rise of the martial castes and classes of north India in the development of Indian army has been skillfully analysed elsewhere.(7) That ethnic, religious and caste groups which consider military service as their hereditary or natural occupation make better fighters in a modern army, is an idea that has played an important role in the formation of the Indian and Pakistani militaries.

This idea – the martial races theory, which dominated British recruitment policy toward the latter part of the 19th century, is another orientalist discourse that has shaped modern perceptions of India’s people’s, the martial north and the non-martial south. Thus in a book published under the official auspices of the government of India, recounting the martial traditions of the Indian army,(8) there is not one tradition connected with a South Indian caste or class.(9) The ‘martial races’ of independent India’ military – the Sikhs, Rajputs, Jats, Gorkhas, Marathas, Punjabis, Dogras, Garhwalis, Mahars and Kuomanis are all north Indian castes and classes. Yet we find that in the early history of the Indian army, South Indian groups such as Tamils and Telugus had distinguished themselves in the crucial wars which subjugated India to British rule.(10)

There are two phases in the decline of the South in the Indian army and the shift in recruitment towards the ‘martial races’ of the north in general and the north western parts of the subcontinent in particular; - what Stephen Cohen calls

the Punjabization of the Indian military.(11).

In the first phase the reorganization of the army after the mutiny of 1857 on the basis of recommendations made by the [Peel Commission in 1859](#) and the [Eden Commission in 1879](#) defined service and recruitment on a territorial basis to suit the policy of divide et impera. Drastic reductions were made in the Bengal army. Brahmins and upper caste Hindus were dropped in large numbers. Active Service for Sepoys was limited to their home Presidencies. And as there was no major internal security problems in the Bombay and Madras Presidencies, they became military backwaters. This was followed by claims that the fighting qualities of the classes in these regions had deteriorated. Reductions were recommended and made in the Bombay and Madras armies.

In the second phase the great threat of the Russian empire on the north western frontier of the Raj in 1885, followed by the [Burma war of 1887-1889](#) created a massive need for manpower “belonging to races whose martial qualities were well authenticated.”(12) As a result the territorial basis of recruitment for divide and rule was given up and castes and classes mostly from India’s northwest where the bulk of the fighting was done, were extensively recruited. Special social and economic privileges were extended to these peoples to ensure a reservoir of martial manpower. “To preserve their loyalty, conserve their martial spirit and enhance their prestige, the colonial state attempted to make time stand still on the northern plains”.(13) Thus began the rise and dominance of the Rajputs, Sikhs, Jats, Punjabi Muslims and Gorkhas in the Indian army. The ideology of this process – the [martial races theory](#) – is another orientalist discourse with its 19th century ‘scientific’ paraphrenalia that has contributed in no small measure to the evolution of modern perceptions of India’s peoples and regions. It sought to establish why some Indian peoples (those who were being extensively recruited) were martial and while others (those who had been dropped in large numbers) were not.

Foot Notes

- (1) ‘Viduthalai Pulihal’ (official organ of the LTTE), April-May 1991, editorial.
- (2) Viduthalai Pulihal; Article of the Tiger insignia, p.3, Feb-March 1991. The flag with the Tiger insignia was declared as the national flag of Tamil Eelam on Great Heroes Day, 27 Nov 1990.
- (3) Baker, C.J. 1976: The Politics of South India (1920-1937). Vikas, Delhi; Irshick, Eugene F 1969: Politics and social conflicts in South India, Berkeley, California.
- (4) Sivathamby, K: Politics of a Literary Style, Social Scientist, No.68, March 1978.
- (5) It has been noted in passing in another context, “...all actions and activities (of the DMK) were presented as activities of warriors preparing for battle. The protest against Hindi became a battle like Purananooru battles...”, C.S.Lakshmi: ‘Mother-Mother community and Mother-politics in Tamil Nadu’, Economic and Political Weekly, October 20-29, 1990.
- (6) Maraimalai Atikal: pp.34-35, Chintanai Katturaikal, English preface to second edition, Kazhakam, 1961.
- (7) Stephen P.Cohen: The Indian Army – Its Contribution to the Development of a Nation, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1990. revised Indian edition. The first edition appeared in 1971. “In the 18 years since this book was first published no other study has appeared which either duplicates or replaces it.” Introduction to revised edition, xi.

(8) Dharm Pal: Traditions of the Indian Army, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt.of India, 1961. A second revised edition was put out in 1979. National Book Trust, Delhi.

(9) Twelve “traditions of Gallantry” in the Indian army are related in part one. The only one of South India is that of the Madras soldier, an amorphous term, for the Madras regiment, is a totally mixed one like the Parachute regiment and recruits any eligible Indian from the South. The other traditions of gallantry which are recounted ‘The Rajput Soldier’; The Sikh soldier etc. refer to specific ethnic caste, religious or regional groups of north India.

(10) Madras Infantry, 1748-1943. Lt.Col.Edward Gwynne Phythian-Adams, Madras Govt.Press, 1943. History of the Madras Army, Lieut.Col.W.J.Wilson, Madras Govt.Press, 5 vols, 1882-89.

(11) Stephen P.Cohen: op.cit, chapter 2.

(12) A phrase used in instructions given to recruiters in the Madras Presidency.

(13) David Washbrook: South Asia, The World System and Capitalism, Journal of Asian Studies, 49, no.3 (August 1990), p.480.

Selected Writings by Dharmeratnam Sivaram (Taraki)

On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay Part 2: Tamil Military Castes

Lanka Guardian, [pp.17-19]
[prepared by [Sachi Sri Kantha](#), for electronic record]
15 May 1992



Thus, towards the latter part of the 19th century, there were large, disgruntled groups with a military past in the Bengal, Bombay and Madras Presidencies. They felt that the vast field of opportunities opened by the expanding Indian army was being unfairly denied to them. This grievance was further exacerbated by views of the British military leadership which relegated them to a non-martial status as races that were not fit to bear arms; in whom fighting qualities had declined.

The reaction of these groups was marked by a compulsion to emphasise the martial credentials of their cultures. Opposition to British rule which emerged among classes affected by the shift in recruitment toward the ‘martial races’ of North western India took shape into an ideology that asserted a national spirit which exalted military virtues and ideals as the cure for the ills of Indian society under the British yoke. Bal Gangadhar Tilak who emerged as a spokesman for the disfranchised military groups became the ideologue of this nationalist Indian militarism. Stephen Cohen has attempted to define Indian militarism in terms of Indian attitudes towards the British-Indian military structure and recruitment.

“There are two fundamentally different sets of Indian attitudes towards the British-Indian military structure, both of which may legitimately be labelled Indian militarism: modern militarism and traditional militarism...emerged in Bengal and western India and spread to other regions. Modern militarism stressed the value of the military as a national universal solvent; as an expression of the national will and demanded equalitarian recruitment. ‘Traditional militarism’ resulted from regional traditions and the recruiting practices of the British. It was confined to those castes and classes which exercised the use of arms as matter of birth right and was unevenly distributed throughout India...”(14)

At the turn of the [20th] century there were two groups in the Tamil region which had a decidedly militarist and anti-British outlook. (a) the adherents of modern Indian militarism – the terrorists – and their sympathizers. (b) the disfranchised traditional military castes.

The dispersion of modern Indian militarism’s basic tenet – that the revival of India’s ‘heroic age’ and its war-like traditions and values was necessary for national emancipation – invested the heroic past and martial cultures of the disenfranchised traditional Tamil military castes with a nationalist significance and cogence. Modern Tamil militarism – the political idea that military virtues and ideals ‘rooted in Tamil martial traditions’ is essential for national resurgence and emancipation – was enunciated at this specific conjuncture in the school of Tamil renaissance established by Pandithurai Thevar – a noble belonging to the sethupathy clan of the dominant traditional Tamil military caste – the Maravar.

Tamil militarism then, is the effect of inter-related modern and traditional components; the former as nationalist renaissance ideology, the latter as caste culture. Traditional Tamil militarism in the Tamil region as elsewhere in India was confined to a group of castes which considered “the use of arms as matter of birth and right”. The Maravar were, according to the Madras Presidency census report for 1891 “a fierce and turbulent race famous for their military prowess” and were “chiefly found in Madura and Tinnevelly where they occupy the tracts bordering in the coast from Cape Comorin to the northern limits of the Ramnad Zemindari.”(15) The Dutch found them to be the traditional soldier caste of Jaffna and availed themselves of their caste services as such (16) – one of the earliest instances of a colonial power making use of a specific military caste in South Asia.

Cohen notes two categories of traditional Indian military castes with different grievances at the turn of the 19th century. (a) “members of classes which were no longer recruited or recruited in small numbers”, (b) “those classes which constituted the army but sought even greater status as commissioned officers.”(17)

The Maravar and their grievances, however belong to a third category. They were a people whom the British attempted to totally demilitarize by depriving them of their traditional status in Tamil society through social, economic and penal measures. This was in direct contrast to the social and economic privileging of such castes and classes in the north, during the same period. They were not only disfranchised but were turned into and classified as a delinquent mass – the subject of a disciplinary and penal discourse – relegated to the fringes of the new social pact which was being established in the Tamil South of the Madras Presidency. The obliteration of their traditions and memory was considered essential to complete the process of demilitarization and pacification of the Tamil region. The martial races theory of recruitment and the subsequent martialization of the north further erased their martial legacy and that of the Tamil South from the military ethnography of the subcontinent.

David Washbrook argues that “the subvention and protection of the north Indian dominant caste communities, and the martialization of their culture, were but two of the many ways in which south Asia paid the price of liberal Britain’s prosperity and progress.”(18) On the other hand the strategy of emasculating and destroying the hegemony

of Tamil military caste communities and the demartialization of Tamil culture were two important ways in which the Tamil South paid the price of India's development as a nation.

The legacy of these strategies in the north and south of the subcontinent, embodied in the structure of the modern Indian army, is central to the emergence of modern Tamil militarism. The gains of this demartialization were consolidated by favouring and encouraging non-military castes in Tamil society which "contrasted favourably with the Maravar".(19)

The more important of these were the Vellalas, Nadars and Adi Dravidas. The culture and values of the "peace loving" (Madras census, 1871) Vellalas who had "no other calling than the cultivation of the soil" eminently suited the aims of demartialization and suppression of the traditional military castes. In this the British were following local precedents which had been based on the principle that the best way to ensure control and security was to "have none there but cultivators" (21). Thus, under active British patronage the Vellala caste established its dominance, and its culture became representative and hegemonic in Tamil society. The Nadars and Adi Dravidas were considered amenable to conversion. A large section of them had become Anglicans. The recruitment base of the Indian army in the Madras Presidency was constituted strongly in favour of these groups. The Dravidian ideology emerged as the cultural and academic basis for their pro-British politics, led by the newly arisen Vellala elite.

The nascent [Dravidian movement](#) was clearly underpinned by the concerns of British administrators and Anglican missionaries (22) in consolidating the social, economic and religious gains of demartialization. This is why the early Dravidian school of Tamil studies and historiography had a strong political compulsion to reject, ignore or play down the dominant role of the traditional military castes in Tamil history and culture, and to assert that Tamil civilization was Vellala civilization. (Maraimalai Atikal, was the chief proponent of this view.)

Thus in the early decades of the twentieth century we find two contending narratives (23) of Tamil national identity – the ideology and caste culture of the anti-British and "turbulent" military castes and the ideology and caste culture of the pro-British and "peace loving" Vellala elite – claiming authentic readings of the Tamilian past and present. The one claiming that the "pure Tamils" were Vellalas. The other claiming that all Tamils are Maravar and that the Tamil nation was distinguished by its ancient martial heritage. How then did Tamil militarism which originally was related to a political and social milieu that was opposed to the Dravidian movement become its dominant feature in the [nineteen] fifties and sixties to the level of strongly impacting on the Tamil nationalist movement in Sri Lanka's north and east?

It was related politically to changes that took place in the Dravidian movement and the changes that took place in Maravar – Indian National Congress relations after the [19]30's. In the Dravidian movement the change was connected mainly with, (a) the rejection of the pro-British elitist leadership of the Justice Party in 1944. (b) the radical change in the attitude towards British rule and imperialism in 1947/048 which gave rise to sharp differences within the movement.

Relations between the Indian National Congress and the Maravar began to deteriorate when the moderate Brahmin leadership of the Madras Presidency Congress preferred not to oppose the harsh measures of the British against the Tamil military castes. The contradiction became sharp when Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar the powerful and influential Marava leader, joined the Indian National Army under Subash Chandra Bose and began organizing the Forward Bloc against the Congress in the Tamil region.(24) The antagonism climaxed in a violent caste conflict in 1957. The Congress government arrested Muthuramalinga Thevar in connection with the riot. The DMK which had very little influence in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu at that time made a strategic intervention at this juncture

in Maravar affairs. [M.Karunanidhi](#), the only DMK candidate to be elected in the southern parts at that time, was chiefly responsible for co-opting the Maravar into the DMK; and for making the culture of the Tamil military castes a dominant and essential component of Tamilian national identity.

For many years, until he became chief minister, Karunanidhi wrote under the pen-name Maravan. His weekly letter to party cadres was known as Maravan Madal (25) – the Maravan’s epistle. Tamil militarism thus became integral to the Dravidian movement. The secessionist militancy of the DMK in the [nineteen] fifties and early [nineteen] sixties was dominated by the vocabulary of Tamil militarism. This was the nadir of the Dravidian movement’s impact on Sri Lankan Tamils. DMK branches were organized in many parts of the north, east and the hill country. It was during this period that a young student named Kathamuthu Sivanandan from Amirthakazhi, a small village near the Batticaloa town who was studying in Tamil Nadu took part in the militant agitations of the DMK. Karunanidhi described him as “the appropriate weapon for Tamil upheaval.”(26). The student who was later known as Kasi Anandan wrote for a fortnightly called Dhee Mu Ka (DMK) (27) when he came back to Sri Lanka. In it appeared his poem, ‘The Maravar clan’- Maravar kulam (28):

“The Tamil army is a Maravar Army...
the enraged Tamils are a Tiger Army (Pulippadai)...”

These lines of the poem are now part of the history and myths of the Tamil Tigers’ genesis.

Foot Notes -

(14) Stephen P.Cohen: op.cit, p.58.

(15) Edgard Thurstan, K.Rangachari: Castes and Tribes of South India, vol.V, 1909, Govt.Press, Madras, pp.22-23.

(16) The Maravar’s connections with Jaffna will be examined elsewhere in this study, especially in view of a recent attempt by a Jaffna historian to show that the early colonists of Jaffna were Maravar and that the rulers of Jaffna belonged to the Sethupathy clan of that caste. He has claimed that Vadamaradchi was in former days Vada Maravar Adchi [the domain of north Maravar]; ‘Yazh Kudi-etram’, K.Muthu Kumaraswamippillai, 1982, Chunnakam, Jaffna.

(17) S.P. Cohen: op.cit, p.59.

(18) David Washbrook: op.cit, p.481.

(19) A phrase used by the British to describe castes which were found suitable for the new order.

(20) Edgard Thurston: op.cit, pp.369-370, VII.

(21) The Portuguese had applied this principle to establish their control in Jaffna. Tikiri Abeyasinghe: Jaffna under the Portuguese, 1986, Colombo, p.24.

(22) The father of the Dravidian ideology, Robert Caldwell was Bishop of Tinnevelly, the seat of Marava power.

(23) For the idea of 'contending narratives' in the formation of national identity in another Indian context, the Ayodhya crisis, see Barbara Stoller Miller: Presidential Address, Journal of Asian Studies, vol.50, no.4, Nov.1991.

(24) The Forward Bloc was found by Subash [Chandra Bose]. I am grateful to Subash Chandra Bose Thevar, the chief subeditor of the 'Virakesari', a Maravar himself, for drawing my attention to this phase of Maravar history and for the valuable comments and material on the subject, when I began this study in 1990.

(25) This was also the name a main DMK party paper, in the [19]60s.

(26) 'Uyir Thamizhukku', Kasi Anandan, Fatima Press, Batticaloa; Preface, p.2, 3rd edition, [publication] year not given.

(27) Two other papers called 'DMK' were published in Sri Lanka during this period.

(28) DMK (fortnightly), 10.7 [i.e., July].1962, Colombo, editor and publisher Vasantha Appathurai.

Note: I am greatly indebted to Prof.K.Sivathamby for his valuable comments on Tamil history and culture and for drawing my attention two years ago to the role of the southern districts of Tamil Nadu in Tamil renaissance.

On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay

Part 3: Tamil Militarism – The Code of Suicide

Lanka Guardian, [pp.13-15 and 24]

[prepared by [Sachi Sri Kantha](#), for electronic record]

1 June1992



"You are to know that in this land of Malabar, there is another caste of people called the Nayres who have no other duty than to serve in war, and they always carry their arms wither so ever they go...they all live with the King and the other great lords; nevertheless all receive stipends from the King or from the great lords with whom they dwell. None may become a Nayre save he who is of Nayre lineage. They will not touch anyone of low caste...The most part of these Nayres when they are seven years of age are sent to schools where they are taught many tricks of nimbleness and dexterity...and when they are fully accomplished in this way they teach them to play with weapons to which they are most inclined. All Nayres are mighty warriors."(1)

observes Duarte Barbosa in his account of the Zamorin's domain (a division of the old Chera kingdom) – one of the earliest records made by the Portuguese within a few years of their entry into the Indian Ocean. The feudal military system described by

Barbosa was common to those parts of South India known to the Portuguese as Malabar. In its southern and south eastern parts the military castes were known as Maravar, Kallar and Ahampadiyar; of these the Kallar and Maravar had kingship traditions. This feudal military system was found in Jaffna as well when the Portuguese arrived. The Palk Strait was known to them as the Marava Bay.

The Tamil country was divided into a number of feudal domains, called *Palayams*, which literally means ‘military camps’ (2), the chief of which was the *Palayakarar* – the commander of the camp. Most of the Tamil *Palayakarar* were Maravar. Each maintained a body of Kallar, Maravar and Ahampadiyar warriors who “served on the battle field and in times of peace engaged in hunting and training in the military arts, nourishing a rugged and practical character”, and serving as village guards (*kaval*) for a contribution (3). In Jaffna “the Maravar had to learn the art of war from the age of sixteen till they were twenty four years of age; then they had to become village kaval-karar, live on land given by the King and return to military service whenever the king required them to do so.”(4)

The military system of the Tamil country was yet a dream in eighteenth century Europe; its armies were in the process of developing methods and regulations which “got rid of the peasant” in the new recruit and “gave him the air of a soldier.” J.Servan, an 18th century French military theoretician wrote a treatise on the ‘soldier citizen’ (1780). He “dreamt of a military machine that would cover the whole territory of the nation and in which each individual would be occupied without interruption, but in a different way according to the evolutive segment, the genetic sequence in which he finds himself. Military life would begin in childhood, when young children would be taught the profession of arms in military manors; it would end in these same manors when the veterans right up to their last day would teach the children, exercise the recruits, preside over the soldier’s exercises...and finally make order resign in the country, when troops were fighting at the frontiers.”(9)

The ideal Palayam was Servan’s military machine; the Kallar, Maravar, Ahampadiyar and Nayar were its ‘oldest citizen’. The Palayam was sustained by a codified martial culture. As we shall see later the practice of martial suicide was most prevalent in the Kongu region of Tamil Nadu, which had a very large number of Palayams.

Early Europeans who studied the military system of the Tamil country were inclined to read therein, some of the ideals embodied in the celebrated regulations of the Prussian infantry that the whole of Europe imitated after the victories of Frederick II. The 18th century British military historian [Robert Orme](#)’s description of the military castes of the Tamil country is typical. He says,

“They are tall, well made and well featured. Their arms are lances and pikes, bows and arrows, rockets and matchlocks, but whether with or without other weapons every man constantly wears a sword and shield. In battle the different arms move in distinct bodies, but the lancemen are rated the most eminent, and lead all attacks. This weapon is eighteen feet long. They tie under the point a tuft of scarlet horse hair, and when they attack horse, add a small bell. Without previous exercise, they assemble in a deep column, pressing close together and advance at a long steady step, in some degree of time, their lances inclining forward but aloft, of which the elasticity and vibration, with the jingle and dazzle scare, the cavalry; and their approach is scarcely less formidable to infantry not disciplined with firearms.”(6)

The boomerang - or *Valai Thadi* in Tamil – was another weapon that “played a considerable part in the Poligar (Palayakarar) ars”. The Kallan and Maravan warriors plied it with deadly effect and “could at one stroke dispatch small game and even man.”(7). Like the Japanese Bakuhān system, the Palayam system was based on a feudal class structure of warriors, farmers, artisans and merchants where the distinctions between the caste statuses of the constituent classes were strictly enforced. To symbolize this society, the Tamil warriors, like the Japanese samurai, wore swords in everyday life because the system was maintained by their military power.

Mr. Lushington who was sent as Collector to Palayakarar (Poligar) country in 1799, desirous of wresting control of the vast revenues of the land, described the Palayam (Pollam) system of Tamil feudal militarism as extremely evil. “When this contribution (Kaval dues) is not quietly submitted to, torture and the whip are applied, the whole people of the village put into confinement, every occupation interdicted, the cattle pounded, the inhabitants taken captive to, and not unfrequently murdered in, the Pollams...and such is the dread which they have inspired into the cultivators of the circar lands by remaining armed in the midst of a country otherwise in profound peace, that these requisitions are never resisted.”(7)

A fierce and ancient martial culture and religion was nurtured by the military castes. As in the other martial regions of India, traditional militarism permeated several levels of society. Therefore, despite the great temple centres, the heroes and godlings of Tamil martial culture were worshipped widely throughout rural Tamilnadu. In Japan, the Samurai nurtured the values of *kyuba-no-michi* (the way of the bow and horse). In the Tamil country, Maram was the martial ethos of the warrior castes. There are three characteristics of Tamil feudal militarism which set it apart from other pre-modern military cultures. They are,

- (a) the detailed codification of the modes of war, the warriors’ martial life and rituals etc.; known as *Purath thinai*.

(b) (b) the rejection of divine participation and perfidy sanctioned by religion in the conduct of war. The great medieval Tamil commentator Naccinarkiniyar says that norms which sanction “killing through perfidy and by virtue of divine powers given by gods” are to be disregarded and that modes of war involving gods are to be rejected and refuted as modes not belonging to the Tamil speaking good world.”(8)

(c) the classification of war with flowers; and a practice of wearing a particular flower when engaging in the mode of war, denoted by that flower. The author of Ramayana had noted that, “the southerners wore flowers for war.”

Codified Tamil feudal militarism was nurtured and transmitted as the Purath thinai division of high Tamil Senthamizh poetics and grammar. Tolkappiyam, the earliest Tamil grammar, the Buddhist grammatical treatise Veerasoliyam, the saivite Ilakkana Villakam (17th century) and Swaminatham, written in early part of the last [i.e., 19th] century are works which contain treatises in which Tamil martial culture is codified and annotated. The perfection and codification of Tamil martial culture through the ages was paralleled by the thematization of several narratives of military glory in Tamil culture through epics, inscriptions, minor forms of poetry etc.

An observation is made in the British Indian army’s recruitment handbook on the Sikhs that, “all sikh traditions whether national or religious are martial; in times of political excitement the martial spirit reasserts itself.”(9) The culture and class interests of Japanese feudal militarism which survived the Meiji restoration partly impelled and characterized Japan’s militarist nationalism and its growth as a modern military power. Similarly it can be said that the culture and structures of codified ‘high Tamil’ and folk forms of Tamil feudal militarism partly impelled and characterized Tamil nationalism when it became militant. Therefore two aspects of Tamil feudal militarism which has been reasserted in Tamil revivalism and militarism will be briefly examined here. They are,

(a) narratives of Tamil military might, thematized in Tamil culture. The most important of these can be reduced to the basic form – Tamil King defeats the Aryans of north India and causes his emblem to be carved on the Himalayas. The Pandyan king Neduncheliyan bore the title ‘He who overran the Aryan army’. All three Tamil dynasties – Chera, Chola and Pandya – are distinguished by this feat in a wide range of texts and inscriptions. These narratives, like the kamikaze – divine wind – legend of Japan’s war with Mongols, have played an important role in the growth of Tamil nationalism.

(b) Codified practices of Tamil martial life.

1. Moothinmullai: the duty of the warrior mother to inculcate the martial ethos and to urge her sons to attain martyrdom in heroic battle. The concept of the warrior mother's duty was central to the genesis of Tamil militarism and later in militant Tamil nationalism. It is a salient theme in LTTE's current literature as well.
2. Avippali, Thannai, Verttal, Vallan pakkam, Pun Kilithu Mudiyum Maram and Marakkanchi: the forms of martial suicide and suicidal battle of the warrior as the ultimate expression of his loyalty to his commander. These six forms of martial suicide are defined as described by the works referred to above.

Pulla Vazhkai Vallan Pakkam – [the martial attitude of the warrior who goes forth into suicidal battle](#) is mentioned by Tholkappiyam. The other works refer to it as *Thannai Verttal*. Duarte Barbosa describes the practice among the Nayar (of the Chera kingdom). It was later noticed by British officials as well. It was also prevalent among the Maravar (of the Pandya kingdom) from whom the suicidal *Aapathuthavi* bodyguard was selected. *Thannai Verttal* also refers to the suicide of a warrior on hearing that his king or commander has died (*Purapporul Venpa Malai*). *Punkilithu Mudiyum Maram* is the martial act of a warrior who commits suicide by tearing apart his battle wound.

Another form of martial suicide mentioned by all the works except Veera soliyam, is *Avippali*. Tamil inscriptions speak of it as *Navakandam*. Inscriptions found in many parts of Tamilnadu provide greater information on the practice. *Navakandam* is the act of a warrior who slices his own neck to fulfil the vow made to *korraivai* – the Tamil goddess of war – for his commanders' victory in battle. The *Kalingathu Parani*(10) – a work which celebrates the victory of the Chola king Kulotunga and his general Thondaman in the battle for Kalinga, describes the practice in detail. “The temple of korraivai is decorated with lotus flowers which bloomed when the warriors sliced their own necks”(106); “they slice the base of their necks; the severed heads are given to the goddess”(111); “when the neck is sliced and the head is severed, the headless body jumps with joy for having fulfilled the vow”(113).

The epics of [Chilapadikaram](#) (5: 79-86) and [Manimekalai](#) (6: 50-51) mention the practice. To ensure the complete severing of the head, the warrior tied his hair to a bamboo bent taut before he cut his neck. Hero stones depicting this practice are found all over Tamil Nadu, and are called *Saavan Kallu* by locals. The warriors who thus committed suicide were not only deified in hero stones (saavan kallu) and worshipped but their relatives were given lands which were exempted from tax(11).

An area handbook (Tharamangalam) of the Tamilnadu archeology department notes that “the Nava Kandam sculpture which is found widely all over Kongu Nadu (Coimbatore, Salem) is to be seen at the Tharamangalam Kailasanathar kovil also. The people call it Saavan Kallu. **“The practice of Nava Kandam existed in Kongu Nadu till the early part of this [i.e., 20th] century.”**(12)

A Saavan Kallu at Thenkarai Moolanatha sami Kovil in Madurai, depicting the act of a warrior holding his hair with his left hand and slicing his neck with his right – 14th century – is said to be annually worshipped by the Conjeevaram Mudaliyars.(13) The Conjeevaram Mudaliyars are Kaikolar, a weaving caste which was militarized under the Chola empire and was made into a special military body; there are indications that Kaikolar warriors practiced Nava Kandam(14). The founder of the DMK, [C.N.Annadurai](#) was a Conjeevaram mudaliyar, of the kaikolar caste.

Apart from these codified forms of martial suicide, a method called *Vadakkiruththal* is mentioned in [Tamil heroic poetry](#). It is the act of a warrior king fasting to death, if some dire dishonour were to come upon him(15). The Tamil teacher, and the Dravidian propagandist, turned the song of the legendary Chera king Irumborai who committed suicide when he was taken captive by his enemies into a compelling theme in Tamil renaissance.

The *Avippali* form of martial suicide as the ultimate expression of loyalty to one's commander, is deeply embedded in the Tamil psyche. *Senchorru-kadan* (the debt of red rice) is a phrase that is widely used today by Tamils as an expression of loyalty. One frequently hears of it in a popular Tamil song. The phrase stands for the ritual of partaking of rice by which Maravar and other Tamil military caste warriors bound themselves to their king or commander to die in suicidal battle for him, or to commit suicide on the day he was slain. Of Avippali, the Puraporul Venba Malai ([verse] 92) says, “thinking of nothing but the red (blood) rice the Maravar give their life as offering in battle.”

The ritual of red or blood rice was described by two Muslim travellers who had visited the Tamil country in the 9th century. “A quantity of cooked rice was spread before the king, and some three or four hundred persons came of their own accord and received each a small quantity of rice from the king's own hands, after he himself had eaten some. By eating of this rice, they all engage themselves to burn themselves on the day the king dies or is slain; and they punctually fulfill their promise.”(16) In modern times it has been observed that “when a Maravar takes food in the house of a stranger, he will take a pinch of earth and put it on the food before he commences his meal.”(17) This act freed him from the debt of blood rice.

Foot Notes

(1) *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, 1518; first published 1812 English translation by Mansel Longworth Dames, 1921 Hakluyt Society, 1866; reproduced by Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1989, vol.II, pp.38-40.

(2) R.P.Sethupillai, 1946: *Thamilaham- Oorum Perum*, Palaniyappa Bros, Madras, p.76.

(3) Robert Caldwell, 1881: *History of Tinnevely*, reproduced by Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1989, p.104.

(4) A. Mootootamby Pillai, 1912: *Jaffna History*, Naval Press, Jaffna, p.104.

(5) Michel Foucault, 1991: *Discipline and Punish*, Penguin Books, translation Alan Sheridan, pp.135, 165.

(6) Quoted in R.Caldwell, *op.cit.* p.103.

(7) Thurston, *op.cit.* vol.III, p.71.

(8) *Tholkappiyam Porulathikaram*, Naccinarkiniyar's commentary on verse No.68 & 90.

(9) Maj.A.E.Barstow, 1928: Sikhs, *Handbook for the Indian Army*, Calcutta Central Publications Branch, p.40.

(10) *Parani* – “A poem about a hero who destroyed 1000 elephants in war”, Tamil Lexicon, vol.IV.

(11) *South Indian Inscriptions*, 1943: Madras, vol.XII, no.106.

(12) R.Poonkunran, 1979: *Tharamangalam*, publication No.58. Tamilnadu Dept.of Archaeology, no pagination. “Kongunadu was well known for its palayams”, R.P.Sethupillai, *op.cit*, p.76.

(13) M.Chandramoorthy: ‘*Kalvettu*’ Quarterly of the Tamilnadu Dept.of Archaeology, no.8, January 1975, pp.21-22.

(14) *South Indian Inscriptions* 1967; vol.XIX, no.3.

(15) *Purananooru*; [verse] 212-223. Kopperun-Cholan who thus committed suicide was apotheosized. K.P.Aravanan examines this practice in relation to the ‘Sallehana’

form of fasting unto death among Jain saints: *The Other side of Tamils*, 1989; Paari Nilayam, Madras. Cheraman Peruncheralathan committed suicide thus when he accidentally received a wound on his back in battle which was considered a great dishonour to a warrior (Purananooru: [verse] 65).

(16) Thurston, *op.cit.*, vol.V, p.287.

(17) Thurston, *op.cit.*, vol.V, p.32.

Note: *Swaminatham* was first published in full in 1975, by S.V.Shanmugam, Annamalai University, based on a manuscript found in the British Museum library. It refers to Avippali as *Poar Avikkoduthal*, verse 141, p.233.

Selected Writings by Dharmeratnam Sivaram (Taraki)

On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay

Part 4: Militarism and Caste in Jaffna

Lanka Guardian, [pp.9-10 and 14]
[prepared by Sachi Sri Kantha, for electronic record]
1 July 1992



Tamil secessionism and Tamil militarism are two sides of the same coin. Both are legacies of the attempt by the British to demilitarize Tamil society in the 19th century. Tamil militarism arose from the grievances of the disfranchised Tamil military castes. Tamil secession was the result of the political ambitions of the classes which were promoted by the British to consolidate the gains of demartialization. Therefore it is necessary to understand the colonial strategies which were aimed at depriving the traditional power and status of the Tamil martial castes in Tamil society.

In those regions of India where military service was confined to specific castes, other castes had no desire to abandon their traditional occupations for soldiering or for violence. Since the ability for violence was caste bound, disfranchising or removing a region's military caste could negate its potential for violence and rebellion. The earliest attempt to thus demilitarize Tamil society was made by the Portuguese in Jaffna. A brief examination of their effort and its impact on the subsequent evolution of society in Jaffna will help understand better the social and political consequences of demilitarization in Tamilnadu two centuries later under British rule.

The Maravar were the traditional soldier caste of Jaffna when the Portuguese arrived. Once they took control, they set about dismantling the feudal military system of the peninsula. Military titles such as Rayer, Athirayer were banned. The traditional soldier castes were seen as a threat to Portuguese control. In 1627 Lancarote de Seixas, Captain Major of Jaffna, put forward the idea that the peninsula's security lay in having none there, but cultivators. Thus began the rise of the Vellalas in Jaffna. The Portuguese seem to have also favoured another caste called the

Madapalli. The Vellas were not only cultivators, but a section of them which had developed scribal skills, provided the local officials, interpreters and karnams (accountants). Successive colonial powers found Vellala scribal groups useful where Brahmins were not forthcoming. Histories of Jaffna were written and presented to the Portuguese, which showed the Vellala and the Madapalli as the original and dominant community of the peninsula.

The Kailaya Malai and the Vaiya Padal, the earliest works on the colonization of Jaffna, appear to be such histories. They name the chieftains of Tamilnadu who had brought Tamil colonists to the peninsula with them. All of them are described as Vellas. But eleven of them have Kallar and Maravar caste titles. The Jaffna Maravar were able to resume their caste occupation under the Dutch, who met troop shortages through Jaffna's feudal military system which the Portuguese had attempted to dismantle. The Dutch governor and director of Ceylon, Thomas van Rhee informed his successor Gerrit de Heere in 1697, that in the Jaffna peninsula "the Marruas are bound to serve the Company as Lascoryns (native soldiers) and pay t[w]o Fanams a year without anything more". But 93 years later, a Dutch census (1790) of all males between the ages 16-70 in Jaffna recorded that there were only 49 Maravar males in the peninsula, as against 1,570 Vellala males. This was due to a widespread process in Tamil society where military castes, finding their traditional status gone, simply adopted the Vellala caste title and returned themselves as peaceful Vellala cultivator, to the colonial census; and in time became endogamous subdivisions of that caste.

In 1834, Simon Casie Chitty recorded in his Ceylon Gazetteer, that Kallar, Maravar, Ahampadiyar and Palli (Vanniyar) were sub-divisions of the Vellala caste. It is clear that the Tamil martial castes of Jaffna had swelled the ranks of the Vellas when faced with unfavourable conditions under colonial rule, as they later did under the British in Tamilnadu. This gave rise to the saying in the peninsula, "Kallar, Maravar and Ahampadiyar came slowly, slowly and became Vellas." But, unlike their counterparts in Tamilnad, the Jaffna Vellas didn't generally change their military caste titles. "In former days the Vellas had the titles of Rayan, Thevan, Kizhan and Mazhavan."

Today, one of these military caste subdivisions of the Jaffna Vellala community, bearing the Kallar caste title Mazhavarayar is a dominant land owning clan in the peninsula. The Mazhavarayar clan is also connected with the history of Thambiluvil in the Eastern province. The Mattakkalappu Manmiyam, a work which deals with the colonization of Batticaloa, mentions the mazhavar frequently among the groups which peopled the Eastern province. Although the 'vellalization' of Jaffna's Tamil military castes predates the same process in south India, Vellala cultural hegemony was achieved in the peninsula only during the early decades of the twentieth century. The persistence of endogamous subdivision identities was one reason for this.

The Vellalization of culture and religion in the peninsula began with Arumuga Navalar's attempt to convert the Jaffnese from their folk religion which was dominated by the heroes and godlings of the Tamil martial castes. The martial caste elements also figures in narratives related to the founding of Valvettithurai and Myliddy – Karaiyar caste villages on the Jaffna coast, which are key. Whereas the Sri Lankan karava (Karaiyar) caste in general has claimed kshatriya status – that they are descended from the Kuru dynasty – a strong narrative is found among the Karaiyar of Myliddy which states that three Marava chieftains who were brothers came with their caste-men from Tamilnadu, married among the karaiyar and founded the village. Its dominant clan, known as Thuraiyar – the others are known as Panivar – was connected by marriage to Ramnad, the home country of the Maravar, until recent times.

The martial arts of Maravar were popular among the Thuraiyar of Myliddy, before their youth were introduced to modern methods of military training in the last decade [i.e., 1980s]. A narrative related to the founding of Valvettithurai, based on folk etymology states that the village arose on land given to a Marava chieftain, called Valliathevan, by the eponymous founder of the Tamil kingdom of Jaffna. But a strong tradition was prevalent among the Karaiyar of Valvettithurai that they had fought the Portuguese as the soldiers of the last king of Jaffna, Sankili.

This tradition, as we shall see later, was greatly exploited by TULF propagandists to mobilise people in that part of Jaffna. The tradition seems to be related to the trade wars between the early colonial powers and the Maravar kings of Ramnad.

The Portuguese, Dutch and the British tried to wrest control of the profitable rice and chank trade between Burma, Bengal and Ceylon which was in the hands of the Thevars (title of the Ramnad kings) and their Muslim and Tamil tradesmen, on either side of the Palk Strait, among whom were many Karaiyar schooner proprietors of Valvettithurai, Point Pedro and Thondamanaru. The British found that one Vaithianathan of Jaffna was among the few confidantes of the Thevar, who were looking after his chank trade in Calcutta. Karaiyar families carried on with the rice and chank trade in collaboration with Muslims, Chetties and military caste families on the south Indian coast from Ramnad to Tanjore, even after the British finally wrested control of it from the Maravar kings of Ramnad.

A large number of Thandayals (traditional navigators – captains of ocean going craft) from Valvettithurai, Point Pedro were employed in the Thevar's domain of sea trade. This became the basis of a vast 'smuggling network' between south India, Sri Lanka and southeast Asia, after independence in 1948. The powerful Vandayar family (Maravar) of Tanjore maintained very close relations with a leading business house of Valvettithurai until 1983. Sometimes such connections between the coastal military castes of south Tamilnadu and the Karaiyar of Jaffna were cemented through marriage. Although Jaffna Tamil society was the earliest to have been de-martialized, and was the only part of the south Indian Tamil region where traditional Tamil military castes were completely subsumed by Vellala identity, it has become the ground in which the most fierce manifestation of Tamil militarism has taken root in modern times. How was this possible? Three reasons can be identified.

(A) The pro-colonial politics of the Jaffna Vellala was not formulated as an attitude against traditional militarisms because the Tamil military castes having assumed the Vellala identity early, were not present as a social threat in the peninsula to the consolidation of colonial authority, after the Portuguese period. Furthermore, the nature of the Vellala caste composition in Jaffna was in itself not amenable to the scribal-agrarian conservatism of the pure Vellala elites, which the British found useful in Tamilnadu. The pseudo-Vellala component of Jaffna was large. A fundamental distinction between the Vellala elite of Tamilnad and Jaffna would illustrate the point.

Arumuga Navalar campaigned against the activities of Christian missionaries and his efforts received support from Ponnuchami Thevar, the chief Marava noble of Ramnad. In former days, the Maravar had opposed the spread of Christianity, by massacring missionaries. On the other hand, in Tamilnad, an ideologue of Vellala elitism – J.M.Nallasami Pillai, who like Navalar worked for the propagation of saiva siddhanthism among the Tamils, was closely associated with and supported by Anglican missionaries in his efforts.

As we shall see later, while Nallasami Pillai carefully and deliberately played down the martial component of Tamil culture and history, attempting to establish that Tamil civilization was constituted by the peace-loving Vellalas, his counterpart in Jaffna, Mootootambi Pillai lamented the decline of the peninsula's martial heritage. He wrote in 1912, "When Sankili – the last king of Jaffna – fought the Portuguese, most of his soldiers were warriors of Jaffna. Even the Portuguese have praised their valour. The victory of the Portuguese was not gained through their bravery, but through Kaakai Vanniyan's treachery. Wasn't it the warrior of Jaffna who conquered the whole of Ceylon? The people (of Jaffna) who are descended of those warriors have lost their martial traits and become a despicable race, having been subjugated long under the Portuguese and the Dutch and as a result having become weak and losing their self-identity." Mootootambi Pillai was reflecting a sentiment that had been expressed in the Madurai Tamil Sangam – established by the Marava noble, Pandithurai Thevar (the son of the noble who had earlier helped Navalar) that the decline of the Tamil nation was caused by the deterioration of its ancient and unique martial heritage.

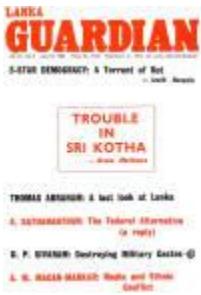
(B) The closure of the avenues by which Vellala upward mobility and conservatism under successive Sinhala governments in Sri Lanka. The colonial powers opened these avenues to promote the class and culture of Vellala conservatism as a bulwark and guarantee against the turbulence of Tamil feudal militarism. The restrictions placed on university admissions and on government jobs seriously undermined the class and culture of Vellala conservatism and its politics of non-violence and compromise. The other narrative that was contending at this juncture, for Tamilian identity – Tamil militarism – began to assert itself as the bulwark built by colonial powers against it crumbled.

(C) Non-Vellala pockets in the peninsula where the values of Vellala conservatism had made little impact.

Selected Writings by Dharmeratnam Sivaram (Taraki)

On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay **Part 5: The suppression of Tamil military castes**

Lanka Guardian, [pp.15-16]
[prepared by [Sachi Sri Kantha](#), for electronic record]
15 July 1992



One of the first concerns of the British as soon as they conquered the southern parts of India was with the ancient and ingrained “habits of predatory war” among the Tamils. The extirpation of these “habits” and culture was considered essential to establishing their authority in Tamil society. The Tamil region was ceded to the British in July 1801; a proclamation was issued by them in December the same year, whereby the use of arms was suppressed and the military service traditionally rendered by the Tamil military castes was abolished.

It was stated in the proclamation that “wherefore the Right Honourable Edward Lord Clive...with the view of preventing the occurrence of the fatal evils which have attended the possession of arms by the Poligars and Servaikaras of the southern provinces...formally announces to the Poligars, Servaikaras and inhabitants of the southern provinces, the positive determination of His Lordship to suppress the use and exercise of all weapons of offence” and that the Palayams would be turned into Zamindari estates for the purpose of preventing the Tamil military castes from engaging in their customary military services. The British proclamation abolished the Palayam system “In the confident expectation of redeeming the people of the southern provinces from the habits of predatory warfare”, and in the hope of inducing them to take up “the arts of peace and agriculture”.

The ban carrying weapons was crucial to the urgent task of depriving the Tamil military castes of their traditional status in the southern provinces. The woods and fortresses of the turbulent Poligars were destroyed and removed from all maps and official documents (They remained so, until the time of Karunanidhi). Lushington, one of the first British officials to be sent to the Tamil region, had noted that the military castes by remaining armed amidst an un-warlike

population wholly devoted to agriculture stood between the East India Company's coffers and the vast revenues of the land (Caldwell: 1888, chapter 9). The demilitarization of the Tamil region did not spare even the Kallar caste which had rendered valuable service to the British in the important wars of the Carnatic, by which they subjugated the whole of south India.

The hereditary chiefs of this military caste were the kings of Pudukottai – the Thondamans, who had sided with the British against Hyder Ali and later his son, Tippu Sultan. In many of the early wars, the British fought on behalf of the Nawab of Arcot in south India, the Kallar had made up a sizeable portion of their forces. But the Kallar and the other Tamil military castes had to be disfranchised to rid Tamil society of its ancient habits and culture of predatory warfare.

What did the British mean by the Tamil habit of predatory war? The Tamil works which contain treatises on martial life and the conduct of war define it as Thannuru tholil (a task undertaken on one's own) and Mannuru tholil (a task undertaken on behalf of the king or commander) – Tholkappiyam, Purathinaiyiyal, [no.]60. Unlike many other martial castes of the subcontinent, the Kallar and the Maravar were not yeoman peasants who dropped the plough for the sword only in times of war. They had to seek battles even when their king or chieftain was not at war. Most of the hero-stones found in Tamilnadu commemorate such battles between groups of Kallar or Maravar.

Some of the warrior gods who are worshipped to this day in southern Tamil Nadu are Maravar, who distinguished themselves in such battles which took place even after the British began to abolish the culture of predatory war. The bow-song of Eena Muthu Pandian, a Tamil demigod, describes the martial life and heroic deeds of that Maravar warrior who lived in British times. The warrior's virtue was to desire the bliss of the hero's heaven; it was degrading for him to seek fertile lands. The Purananooru (an anthology of Tamil heroic poems) derides the newly arisen kings for their interest in rice yielding fields (verse 287). War was the sole occupation and aim of the Tamil warrior clans. A mother describes the Tamil martial ethos – 'To bring forth and rear a son is my duty; To make him a warrior is the father's duty'. To make spears for him, is the blacksmith's; to bear bright sword and do battle, to butcher enemy's elephants and return, that is the young man's duty" (verse 312).

In many seventeenth and eighteenth century British reports the epithet "fierce and turbulent" is very often used to describe the Tamil military classes. Their ancient and deep-rooted cultural hegemony in Tamil society was seen as a positive threat to the perpetuation of colonial rule. To eradicate it, the British adopted a dual strategy. On the one hand they attempted to destroy the social structures which sustained this culture; on the other, they promoted castes which stood to gain from the suppression of the military castes. The most important structure which gave the Kallar and Maravar immense power in the Tamil country-side was the system of kaval. It was abolished in 1832. This has been the traditional means by which the Kallar, Maravar and Ahampadiyar derived their livelihood in times of peace when they were not employed as soldiers.

The manual of the Tinnevelly district, described the origins of the Maravar kavalkarars thus: "As feudal chiefs and heads of a numerous class of the population, and one whose characteristics were eminently adapted for the followers of a turbulent chieftain, bold active, enterprising, cunning and capricious, this class constituted themselves or were constituted by the peaceful cultivators, their protectors in times of bloodshed and rapine, when no central authority existed. Hence arose the system of desha and stalum kaval, or the guard of separate villages. The feudal chieftain (and his Kallar and Maravar) received a contribution from the area around his fort in consideration of protection afforded against armed invasion."

The village and district kaval system permeated many levels of rural Tamil society and hence was hindrance to the

effective implementation of new form of administration and revenue collection. In some instances kaval was taken over from the military castes and was handed over to the Shanar (Caldwell; 1888, p.224) or anti-Kaval movements were encouraged among non-military castes to coerce them to give up kaval, sell their lands and leave (Madras Presidency Police Administration, 1896). Many efforts were taken to put a stop to the kaval services of the Tamil military castes in the countryside in the first half of the nineteenth century, culminating in the organization of a new police system in 1860, which recruited mostly from among castes which were considered favourable to the British.

The Adi-Dravidas or Parayar were recruited heavily into the Indian Army. The Nadu-Ambalakarar institution of the Kallar by which justice was traditionally dispensed in regions dominated by them was also abolished to make way for the penal and judiciary system introduced by the British. Deprived of their traditional occupations of kaval and soldiering and in some instances of their lands, a large section of the Tamil military castes became, in the eyes of the colonial government, a delinquent mass, a danger to the rural social order. A body of administrative and ethnographic literature arose on this perception and on the need to portray and classify the Tamil martial castes as criminal. It also relegated them to the margins of Tamil history and culture. The Kallar and Maravar who had been referred to as the military tribes of the southern provinces by early British writers were classified as criminal tribes towards the end of the nineteenth century.

The task of disfranchising the Tamil military castes and destroying the structures of their traditional power in Tamil society was strengthened by the promotion of the Vellalas, Shanaras (Nadaras), Adi-Dravidas and the Nattampadis, who contrasted favourably with the Maravar and suited the aims of revenue, security and conversion. Among these, the Vellalas acquired the most favoured status for the following reasons:

- (A) They were, according to the 1871 Madras census report, “a peace loving, frugal, and industrious people”. They were essential to consolidating the new revenue and the Administrative Manual (Coimbatore) noted that the Vellalas were “truly the backbone of the district. It is they who by their industry and frugality create and develop wealth, support the administration, and find the money for imperial and district demands.”
- (B) It was ascertained that “according to native ideas”, husbandry was their only proper means of livelihood and that they had no established traditions of kingship, like Kallar and Maravar. The Madurai Manual noted that Aryanayaga Mudali, the great general of the sixteenth century was dissuaded from making himself a king on the ground that no Vellalan ought to be a king.
- (C) They were found suitable for the expanding manpower needs of British administration. They were unsurpassed as accountants and many of them were employed as Karnams or village accountants.
- (D) They were extremely conservative in their outlook. The Tanjore Manual observed, “in religious observances, they are more strict than the generaliry of of Brahmins; they abstain from both intoxicating liquors and meat.”

It is in this milieu that the Dravidian movement took shape as the pro-British of the de-martialized Tamil social order.

Letter of Correspondent M.Raja Joganantham [Colombo 6]:

Militarism and Caste

[Lanka Guardian, July 15, 1992, p.16]

With the reference to the above article in Lanka Guardian (1 July) 1992. In the article [by] the writer Mr.D.P.Sivaram, some facts are incorrectly stated. The statement a strong narrative is found in Myliddy is correct. The names of the chieftains are Veera Maniccathevan, Periya Nadduthevan & Narasinhathevan. The statement that the Marava chieftains and their castemen married among Karaiyar of the village is also correct. But the statement about Thuraiyar and Panivar is incorrect. I am one of the descendants of the ancient family of the village,

and the writer of an article titled as, 'Ancient Villages in Jaffna', which appeared in Eelanadu on The clans known as Thuraiyar and Panivar in this village are the descendants of the ancient families of Myliddy. The martial arts of Marava are popular among these two clans, though the Thuraiyar is considered as superior. Thuraiyar as well as Panivar were connected by marriage to Ramnad, the home country of the Maravar, for which evidence is available.

I am one of the descendants of the ancient family of the village, and the writer of an article titled as, 'Ancient Villages in Jaffna', which appeared in Eelanadu on 13.07[July] 1986.

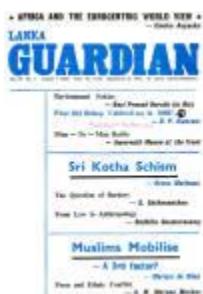
Selected Writings by Dharmeratnam Sivaram (Taraki)

On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay

Part 6: Bishop Caldwell and the Tamil Dravidians

[including [Note by Sivaram](#), [Letter from Sachi Sri Kantha, 1992](#)
& [Post Script by Sachi Srikantha, 2005](#)]

Lanka Guardian, [pp.15-16]
[prepared by [Sachi Sri Kantha](#), for electronic record]
15 July 1992



Robert Caldwell (1819-1891) was the father of the Dravidian movement. He was the Bishop of Tinnevelly – the heartland of the Maravar Poligars – during the times when the British were engaged in suppressing the Tamil military castes in the Tamil region. His monumental work, The Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian Languages, which was published in 1856 laid the theoretical foundation of the political, academic and cultural movement that came to dominate Tamilian life in the twentieth century. The work argues that all south Indian languages (and a few others elsewhere in the subcontinent, like Brahui) belong to a distinct family of tongues called the Dravidian languages. This challenged the widely held view of the time that most of India's cultivated languages were derived from Sanskrit.

It followed therefore that the culture and civilization of the Dravidian peoples of south India were intrinsically unique. The role of these ideas in the inception of the Dravidian movement has been examined in detail elsewhere (Irshick; 1969, Hardgrave; 1965, Sivathamby:1978). These studies have been in terms of the cultural and political contradictions between the newly arisen non-Brahmin elites and the Brahmins who had achieved a pre-eminent place under colonial rule in the Madras Presidency.

The intention of this study however is to show that the fundamental tenets of the nascent phase of the Dravidian ideology were essentially linked to the political and cultural legacies of the British attempt to demilitarize Tamil society.

The writings of Bishop Caldwell presuppose a teleological project which was not uncommon to what were conceived as great intellectual undertakings in that era of empire building. The assumptions of the project formed the basis of his Dravidian theory. They were,



Bishop Caldwell
1814 - 1891

- (a) That the British empire was destined to finally bring order amongst Tamils, a large portion of whom had been more prone to the habit of war than to the arts of peace from the dawn of history in south India,
- (b) That this order would be the one in which the imminent protestant ethos of the Dravidian civilization would reach its full expressional ethos which the English administrator saw as the virtue of those classes which “contrasted favourably with the Maravar”, and whom the Bishop considered the legitimate Tamilians,
- (c) That the rediscovery of Dravidian linguistic and cultural uniqueness would help consolidate the position of the ‘lower classes’ among the Tamils who had played an important role in the military expansion of British rule in the subcontinent – the Tamil Christian soldiers who were the Empire’s alternative to the traditional Tamil military castes.

In the concluding remarks of his ‘A History of Tinnevelly’(1888), Caldwell says,

“A mixed government...came thus to an end and was succeeded by a government purely English, at unity with itself, and as just as it was powerful. The results of this change have been most important and valuable. Professor Wilson...places in a striking light the course things would have taken if the English Government had not been enabled to interpose its authority.”

“It may be concluded,” he says, “that had not a wise and powerful policy interfered to enforce the habits of social life, the fine districts to the south of Kaveri...would have reverted to the state in which tradition describes them long anterior to Christianity, and would have once more have become a suitable domicile for the goblins of Ravana.”

The first reflection that arises in one’s mind on reading the foregoing sketch of the history of this district is, that war seems to have been the normal condition of Tinnevelly, as of the rest of the old Pandya country...from the beginning of man’s abode in these regions till A.D. 1801 (the year in which the Tamil country was ceded to the British).

Caldwell also notes that,

“Of the beneficial changes that have taken place since then, the most remarkable is that which we see in the Poligars themselves.” He claims with satisfaction that many among the regions martial classes were taking to agriculture; and of the Maravar, he says “the change wrought amongst the poorer class of the Maravas is not perhaps quite so complete...though once the terror of the country they are now amenable to law and reason...” Tamil society was thus ‘unity with itself’ and was realising its destiny under the British Empire. He asserts that “Race after race of rulers have risen up in this country, has been tried and found wanting, and has passed away.” But that the Tamils “accept our government readily and willingly as the best government they have ever had and the best they are likely to have

in this age of the world.”

Under the “paternal government” of the English, Tamils were becoming a peaceful and industrious nation. The last “race of rulers” which had risen up and passed away in the Tamil country were the turbulent Maravar. English rule was the only one that was not found wanting because its principles and protestant ethos were in consonance with what Caldwell assumed were the ‘true’ religious and moral ideas of the Dravidian race.

Although as a historian, he was well aware of the hegemony of the Maravar’s martial culture in Tamil society, its exclusion from what he desired to portray as the true Dravidian civilization was central to the imperial and religious interests of Caldwell’s teleological project. The English, in suppressing the martial castes, were restoring the sovereignty of Tamil society’s “legitimate rulers” – the peasantry and lower classes.

In Caldwell’s view, the Tamil military castes had to seek “the safer and more reputable occupation of husbandmen” (Caldwell: 1888, p.229). However, he was deeply suspicious of their peace. Commenting on the Poligar wars, he wrote,

“The population of the sequestered Pollams (Palayams) seemed to be delighted with the opportunity afforded them of trying their strength with the English once more, being thoroughly discontented, no doubt, with the peaceful life now required of them” (p.197).

And he condemned a suggestion ventured by the author of the Tinnevelly Manual, Mr. Stuart that the Palayam system of the Tamil military castes was historically inevitable as the fiefdoms of medieval Europe – “It is so seldom that one hears a good word about Poligars that I quote these remarks of Mr. Stuart with pleasure... I fear, however, that the misdeeds of the Poligars were more systematic and audacious than those of the feudal nobles of Europe in the Middle Ages.” (p.59)

Apart from concerns shared with the British Government, the Bishop’s hostile attitude towards the Maravar arose from the bloody violence they unleashed on the Shanar, large numbers of whom were embracing the Protestant faith. For him, if the idolatory and the Sanskritic culture of the articulate Brahmins was a spiritual threat to the propagation of the Gospel, the violence and misdeeds of the Maravar against the faithful was a dire physical threat. In his scheme of Tamilian history, the culture and ethos of the classes through whom the British government and the Anglican Church sought to consolidate the gains of Tamil society’s demilitarization were seen by Caldwell as the true characteristics of the Tamils.

The martial habits of the Maravar and the Sanskritic culture of the Brahmins were alien to the social order and moral ideals of the ‘true’ Dravidians.

These views were shared by many English missionaries of the 19th century who worked among the Tamils. Missionaries and administrators found evidence for this in many religious and didactic Tamil texts. Henry Martyn Scudder published a book in 1865, in which he “used Tamil texts and poems to support the missionary position that even in ancient Tamil texts many Christian ideas were present.” (Irshick; 1976, p.15). This belief led to the introduction of what were thought to be Tamil works, with little or no extraneous influence in institutions of higher education run by missionaries.

The college curriculum created a market for the publication of such works. This in turn gave an impetus to the rediscovery of many ancient Tamil works (U.V.Saminatha Iyer; En Sarithiram, p.714), which paradoxically led to

the publication of Purananooru and the Purapporul Venba Malai, texts that portrayed the ancient Tamils as a fierce martial race and lay the foundation of modern Tamil militarism. Thus Caldwell's teleology assumed that Tamil revivalism would help consolidate the protestant ethic and the allegiance to English rule among the non-military castes in Tamil society, by giving expression to the moral and religious ideas which he assumed were imminent in their ancient Dravidian culture and language.

The administrative manual of the Madurai district commended a section of this class of Tamils thus, "They...contrast favourably with the Maravars, being very orderly, frugal, and industrious". Other section, the Shanar it was stated, "have risen enormously in the social scale by their eagerness for education, by their large adoption of Christianity, and by their thrifty habits. Many of them have forced themselves ahead of the Maravars by sheer force of character." (Thurston: 1906, p.373).

It was to these 'loyal' classes of Tamils that Caldwell referred to when he wrote in the introduction to his Grammar that

"All throughout Ceylon, the coolies in the coffee plantations are Tamilians; the majority of the money-making classes even in Colombo are Tamilians; and it seems not unlikely that [?]ere long the Tamilians will have excluded the Singhalese from almost every profitable employment in their own Island. The majority of the Klings or Hindus, who are found in Pegu, Penang, Singapore and other places in further East, are Tamilians; a large portion of the Coolies who have emigrated in such numbers to the Mauritius and to the West Indian colonies are Tamilians; in short wherever money is to be made, wherever a more apathetic or a more aristocratic people is waiting to be pushed aside, thither swarm the Tamilians, the Greeks or Scotch of the East, the least superstitious and the most enterprising and persevering race of Hindus." (Caldwell: 1856, p.7).

Caldwell's Dravidian theory thus gave rise to a vocabulary in which the word Tamil came to connote the non-Brahmin, non-martial aspects of Tamil culture. Bishop Robert Caldwell in laying the foundation of the Dravidian movement also endeavoured and partially succeeded in dispersing the impression that the Tamils who, only a few years before his time were thought of as being "prone to the habit of war", were a peace loving and industrious nation. The intellectual endeavours of the learned missionary made the British Empire cherish an ulterior hope that the 'Dravidian' Tamils would remain the faithful among the faithless, the bedrock of the Raj for a long time to come – the events of the great mutiny and the rise of the Dravidian movement proved them correct.

Note

I am thankful to Mr.Joganathan of Wellawatte for drawing my attention to the fact that the Panivar clan of Myliddy is also connected to Ramnad. My information however was based on

- (a) Place Name Studies – Kankesanthurai Circuit, by Dr.E.Balasunderam of the Jaffna University, 1988, pp.5-6. The book was published for the Mani Vizha of S.Appadurai of Myliddy.
- (b) An interview with Mr.Ratnalingam of Myliddy politburo member of a Tamil militant group who I believe is a relative of Mr.Joganathan. The foot-notes could not appear due to an unavoidable circumstance.

Letter of Correspondent Sachi Sri Kantha [Osaka 565, Japan]:

Prabhakaran's Mentors

[Lanka Guardian, August 1, 1992, p.2]

D.P.Sivaram's thought-provoking analysis on the history of Tamil militarism (May 1, May 15, June 1 and July 1) was a delight to read. However, he has omitted an essential contributing factor to the militarism of the LTTE. It is too simplistic to believe that the historical traditions of the different castes among Tamils in Tamil Nadu and Jaffna alone contributed to the emergence of Tamil Tigers. If that is so, which caste does Clint Eastwood belong to? I pose this question because Prabhakaran had gone on record to acknowledge the influence of Clint Eastwood movies in developing his own martial acumen.

While Sivaram had commented on the links the current DMK leader M.Karunanidhi developed with the Maravar community, he has failed to note that more than Karunanidhi's journalistic skills, it was the movies of Kandy-born M.G.Ramachandran, which brought a sense of martial pride to the Tamil masses, both in Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka. In the late 1940s and whole of 1950s, MGR acted in a series of Tamil historical costume-adventures to highlight the Tamil martial tradition. Especially successful as box-office 'hits' were the movies with names that began with the first syllable 'Ma'. The names of these movies told the past glory of Tamil. These include, Manthri Kumari (Minister's Daughter), Marutha Naatu Ilavarasi (Princess of Marutha Land), Marma Yogi (Mysterious Ascetic), Malai Kallan (Mountain Thief), Madurai Veeran (Hero of Madurai), Maha Devi (The Great Devi) and Mannaathi Mannan (King of Kings). In all these movies, MGR exhibited his martial skills to thrill his fans. There is no doubt that Prabhakaran and his original band were more influenced by these MGR movies than by anything else.

A Post-script in 2005 by Sachi Sri Kantha to this 1992 Correspondence:

In 1992, I was fully aware that Mervyn de Silva, the editor of Lanka Guardian, exercised his editorial pen sharply; thus I had to limit my critical comments to a maximum of 300 words for this type of unsolicited correspondence, if I wanted to see my letter in print. Thus I exercised word economy, as well as 'hooks' to tease Mervyn de Silva's erudite eyes. The sarcastic sentence, "If that is so, which caste does Clint Eastwood belong to?" was one of such 'hooks', and I didn't mean it to undermine author Sivaram's scholarship.

Also, I didn't elaborate further on the probable significance of MGR's fascination with the alphabet 'Ma'; call it a cryptic acknowledgment to the warrior 'Maravar' caste. For a whole decade [1950s], MGR named quite a number of his costume-adventure movies with the first syllable 'Ma'. It is also not inconsequential, that his ancestors belonged to the Manradiyar caste of Kovai district, Kangeyam constituency, who settled in Maruthur in Kerala state [see, Puratchi Nadigar MGR (in Tamil), edited by Lena Thamilvanan, Manimegalai Publishers, Chennai, 1994, 2nd edition, p.6]. Then in the 1960s, when contemporary social themes became his movie vehicles, MGR chose 'Thaa' as the first syllable for a number of his movie titles or the word Thai as suffix in the movie titles.

Can one attach any significance to these word games of a movie star? Cynics may say no. But, movie stars – like politicians and sportsmen – also have superstitions on success for 'gains', 'hits' or 'runs', and image-making via movie careers is not necessarily limited to Tamil Nadu. Hollywood had given birth to Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Thus, MGR and his illustrious contemporary Sivaji Ganesan - as actor-politicians – who dominated the Tamil movies from 1950s to 1970s and made producers and directors to dance to their wishes and whims - may not have been exceptions. Sivaji Ganesan also had a series of successful movies, which began with the short syllable 'Pa' or long syllable 'Paa' in late 1950s and 1960s.

Finally, the theme of kaval-karar - described by author Sivaram in part 5 of his series – did receive attention in MGR’s movies, especially in his successful Madurai Veeran (1956) movie. Kavalkaran was also the title of another MGR movie released in 1967, under the banner of his own company, Sathya Movies.

Selected Writings by Dharmeratnam Sivaram (Taraki)

On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay Part 7: The Tamil Soldier and the Dravidian Diaspora

Lanka Guardian, [pp.12-13 and 28]
[prepared by [Sachi Sri Kantha](#), for electronic record]
15 August 1992



The idea of the ‘modern Indian army’ is rarely associated with the Tamils. The nature or its ethnic composition generates the impression that it is a predominantly north Indian phenomenon. This impression has become so strongly established that the military history of the British Empire’s rise has been studied in recent times in connection with the role of the ‘martial peoples’ of north India in the British Indian army. The tenacity and power of this ‘impression’ in modern scholarship is best illustrated in the argument of David Washbrook:

“The role the British Indian army played in international affairs over the course of the 19th century however, lifts it out of the context of British Indian relations and places it in a broader global perspective. It was not an army intended primarily for domestic defence and police duties in India. Rather, it was the army of British Imperialism, formal and informal, which operated worldwide, opening up markets to the products of industrial revolution, subordinating labour forces to the dominating of capital and bringing to ‘benighted’ civilizations the enlightened values of Christianity and Rationality. The Indian army was the iron fist in the velvet glove of Victorian expansionism. Moreover, because the British Empire was the principal agency through which the world system functioned in this era, the Indian army was in a real sense the major coercive force behind the internationalization of industrial capitalism. Paradoxically (or not!), the martialization of north Indian society and, in many ways the feudalization of its agrarian relations, were direct corollaries of the development of capitalism on a world scale during the 19th century.” (Washbrook: 1990)

Washbrook’s view is based on what the Indian army was towards the latter part of the nineteenth century. It is underpinned by an “impression” which arose many years after the British had established their strategic hold on India and had laid the Empire’s foundation with what was known as their ‘Coastal Army’ which was built up in the latter half of the 18th century, mainly with Tamil soldiers. The British succeeded in empire-building not by martialising dominant north Indian military caste communities, but by building up a cheap but loyal and effective army of predominantly Tamil soldiers. Until the latter half of the 19th century, it was the Tamil Christian soldier who was the main coercive force behind the expansion of the Empire in the subcontinent and elsewhere.

The British recruitment handbook for Madras classes, says

“It can truthfully be said that the Coast Army was mainly instrumental in conquering India for the British.” (p.8) The Tamil soldier was seen as the bearer of the Sword and the Bible – with few religious and caste prejudices which made him suitable for expeditions beyond the sea unlike his more expensive brethren in north India. Contrary to what Washbrook claims, the early phase of British overseas expansion in East, West and South Asia was not based on the martialisation of north Indian society, but on the south Indian alternative to its military labour market – the loyal classes of Tamils.

“During this whole period, as always throughout its existence, the Coast Army was specially noteworthy for the cheerful alacrity with which its regiments have volunteered of service overseas. The Bengal regiments on many occasions refused to embark for foreign service, on the plea that it was contrary to their religion. But the Coast Army willingly embarked, and took a leading part in many successful expeditions, including Manila (1762), Mahe (1779), Ceylon (1782 and 1795), Amboyna and the Spice Islands (1796), Egypt (1801-02), Bourbon and Mauritius (1810) and Java (1811-12)”.

The Coast Army took part in the final expedition against the King of Kandy which was followed by the first war in Burma (1824-26). The first war by the British in China was also fought by them in 1840-42 where the 37th Madras Infantry was made grenadier battalion for its distinguished conduct. Sir Hugh Gough reported on their service in the China war that “their perseverance and gallantry before the enemy have secured for them the confidence of the British European soldiers.” (Recruitment Handbook for Madras Classes, p.6)

Even a brief study of the history of the Coast Army and the Tamil soldiers who were recruited into it would reveal that the ‘military agency’ which “conveyed British capitalist power to areas of the world (including the South Asian hinterland) it could not otherwise have reached” had a very small proportion of north Indian military groups. Washbrook’s argument that the World Capitalist system which the British Empire helped so much to expand rested heavily on the intermediation of the Indian army and that without it and similar agencies constituted outside the European capitalism core, “the forces of world capitalism would have been ethnic, much weaker or else of a very different kind” is plausible but the argument that harnessing the dynamic potential of the readily available north Indian military groups made it cheaper for the British to rapidly expand their empire, is untenable in view of the two most critical phases which determined the hold of the English on the subcontinent.

The first phase begins towards the middle of the 18th century. It was the contest with the French that first compelled the British to abandon their policy in India till then, that was bad for trade, and raise local troops. There was in the subcontinent at that time paramilitary caste groups whose services could be obtained for a fee. The British unlike the great Indian princedoms in that era could not afford the soldiery of the high caste martial groups although they very much desired them. From the proceedings of the government, dated 7th May 1770, it appears that the Sepoy battalions then consisted of Mohamedans, Tamils and Telugus, but no details of caste are given. It may be inferred that the number of Brahmans, Rajputs and Maharattas in the Madras army was very small. It is clear that the authorities were desirous of restricting enlistments to men of good caste, but it is equally clear that this was not practicable during the last (18th) century.”

Again in 1795, it is stated that “owing to the small pay of the sepoy and the high price of rice, considerable difficulty was experienced in obtaining good recruits, and the battalions were kept up to their proper strength by accepting undersized men and those of low caste.” (Phytian Adams: 1943). Yet Stringer Lawrence and Clive succeeded in making the cheap low caste Tamil sepoys into an army with which the English were able to establish themselves as

the main European trading group in India, in the contest with the French. It later won all the crucial battles that subjugated most of India during the course of the seventy five years since recruitment of the first Tamil sepoy levies began in the northern parts of Tamilnadu in 1746.

The East India company established its first military department at Madras in 1752. The main reason behind the rapid rise of the British in this era was their low cost but hardy army. The major Indian kingdoms of the time, although possessed of modern and larger forces were falling into financial difficulties in maintaining their expensive high caste soldiery whose pay arrears was frequent cause for mutiny. The English fought with the advantage of an extremely loyal army which did not rebel for pay. The Recruitment Handbook of the Madras classes records ‘never were these qualities more fully tried than in the war with Hyder. The pay of the army was sixteen months in arrears, famine raged all over the country, the enemy was at the gates offering large bounty and pay to our Sepoys to desert, but in vain. Under all these circumstances severe action were fought. Their conduct during the war excited the admiration of all who knew it, and Frederick the Great of Prussia was known to have said, “after reading Orme’s account of the war, that had he the command of troops who acted like the sepoys on that occasion, he could conquer all Europe.”(9)

The second crucial phase in which the future of the British as an Empire building power was determined was the period in which the Indian Mutiny erupted in North India. Again, it was the loyal Coast Army that helped the English survive the Mutiny. It was the Mutiny that made the British reorganize the Indian army into that form which Washbrook considers in his thesis.

“In 1857-58, came the great Mutiny of the army in Bengal, when the Coast Army displayed its loyalty and devotion in no uncertain manner. In a despatch dated the 19th August 1859, the Secretary of State of India said, ‘The commander-in-chiefs Minute contains only a slight sketch of the important services rendered by the Madras army during the great contest in the North of India. The great fact has been the perfect fidelity of that army and the perfect loyalty of the 23 millions of persons who inhabit this Presidency, which enabled the resources of the South of India to be freely put forth in support of our hard-pressed country men in North.’”

Lieut-General Sir Patrick Grant said,

“The services in the field of the Troops of this Presidency employed in the suppression or the Rebellion and the Mutiny are now a matter of history, and the glowing terms in which they have been recognized must endure for ever, an unperishable record of this noble soldiers. It can never be forgotten that, to their immortal honour, the native troop of the Madras army have been, in the words of the Earl of Ellenborough, faithful found among the faithless.”

The Dravidian ideology was underpinned by the idea of the loyal Tamil soldier of British Coast Army, bringing to “benighted” civilizations the enlightened values of Christianity and Rationality. Caldwell and his successors elaborated a theory of a Tamil Diaspora as the bedrock of Protestantism and the English Empire on this idea.

Bishop N.C.Sargant, who like Caldwell, was the Church of England’s Bishop of Tinnevely spells it out clearly in his ‘Dispersion of the Tamil Church’:

“The Tamils are great soldiers; they went with the army along with their families and lived in its newly established camps and in the newly captured territories...they were excellent instruments for establishing the Church among the Telugu and Kannada speaking peoples.” “There is much evidence to show that Tamil soldiers – of the British Indian Army – and those (Tamils) who followed the army took the gospel with them to the other parts of India.” (Sargent:

1940, p.32 and p.68)

About the intention of his word, Sargant says,

“The Dispersion of the Jews was a preparation for the spread of Christianity in the ancient world. Similarly can it be said that the Dispersion of the Tamil church helped the missionaries? The first Apostles found some God fearing Jews, as their first believers. Did the missionaries find the Tamils perceptive...was this race the first fruit of Christian work? I tried to find answers to such questions...This research made me understand that Christ realised many unexpected and inexplicable things through the Dispersion of the Tamils and the Tamil Church.”

Sargant, like Caldwell and Bishop Whitehead before him, believed that research into ancient Dravidian forms of expression found in Tamil would reveal that there were many surprising words and ideas which denoted Christian concepts such as that of sin. “Like the ancient Hebrews the ancient Dravidians also tried to lead a righteous spiritual life.”(p.3) The close connection between the British Indian army’s early conquests, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (S.P.G.), the Dispersion of the English Church, and the Tamils of Bishop Caldwell’s flock in Tinnevelly is described by Sargant in detail (chapters 2, 3, 5). Thus the Tamil soldier, the Tamil Diaspora and the Dravidian movement came to constitute a basis of the British Imperial project.

The nationalist reaction to this project in the Tamil country, articulated by the terrorist movement, proclaimed modern Tamil militarism as the means of national emancipation from British rule.

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Selected Writings by Dharmeratnam Sivaram (Taraki)

On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay

Part 8: The Twin Narratives of Tamil Nationalism

Lanka Guardian, [pp. pp.10-12]
[prepared by [Sachi Sri Kantha](#), for electronic record]
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At the turn of the Twentieth century Tamil nationalism was articulated in terms of two different interpretations of Tamilian identity, propagated by two distinct movements which were politically opposed to each other. The one was the Dravidian school; the other was the Indian revolutionary movement. The former was closely associated with English missionaries and unequivocally supported British rule; the latter strongly opposed the Raj and preached violence as the chief means of national emancipation from foreign domination.

The discourse that may be identified today as Tamil nationalism is constituted at its basis by these two interpretations – or more appropriately ‘founding’ narratives – which contended with each other to offer authentic readings of the Tamilian past and present, of what ‘really’ constituted Tamilian identity. The Dravidian school gave political and academic form to linguistic ethno-nationalism; the revolutionary movement turned traditional Tamil militarism into a liberation ideology, which evolved into militarist ethno-nationalism. The militarist reading has also characterised Tamil ethno-nationalism in the twentieth century not merely because it was “constructed and deployed to advance the interests and claims of the collectivity, banded and mobilized as a pressure group” but also because, as this study intends to show, it appealed to, and arose out of the structures of experience produced and reproduced through folk culture and religion in rural Tamilnadu.

This is how, as we shall see later, MGR became Madurai Veeran, the warrior god of a numerous scheduled caste in Periyar district in Tamilnadu. Jeyalalitha contested from an electorate there in the last election [i.e., 1991 general election]. However, it is essential to understand the politics behind the claims and silences of the early Dravidian school of Tamil revivalism and ‘historiography’ for examining the rise of modern Tamil militarism.

Caldwell and his followers who wrote and spoke about Tamil culture and history endeavoured to show that Tamils were essentially a peaceful people who had achieved a high level of civilization independent of and prior to the arrival of the ‘Aryans’ in the Indian subcontinent. This was the unique Dravidian civilization. The theory of Dravidian linguistic and hence cultural independence also contained in it the idea that the Tamils were originally a class of peaceful farmers. The politics of Caldwell’s teleology compelled him [to] introduce this idea into his writings. (It was seen earlier that it arose from the attitude he shared with the English rulers towards the Maravar.) The views of Bishop Caldwell were found to be extremely useful by the newly arisen Vellala elite which was contending for higher status in the Varna hierarchy of caste. Therefore the ‘histories’ which were written by the Dravidian school of Tamil studies at the turn of the [20th] century were underpinned by,

- (a) The political and religious concerns of Caldwell and other missionaries like Henry Martyn Scudder and G.U.Pope
- (b) The caste politics of Vellala upward mobility.

The interests of both were intertwined. Their express political interest was to show that Tamil culture in essence was pre-Aryan-Brahmin and non-martial. The first non-Brahmin Tamils to take up the Dravidian theory to examine the Tamil past belonged to the Vellala elite and were supported and encouraged by Protestant missionaries (and sometimes by English administrators).

The writings of Professor Sunderam Pillai of the Trivandrum University on Tamil history and culture inspired many of his castemen who had been seething at being classified as Sudras by the Brahmins, and worse, by the British caste census and courts of law as well.

Thus, the historical works of the early Dravidian school were produced as “social charters directed toward the census, where the decennial designation of caste status became a major focus for contests over rank between 1870 and 1930.



V.Kanakasabhai Pillai
1855 - 1906

The first Dravidian history of the Tamils, ‘The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago’, was written by V.Kanakasabhai Pillai, a Vellala from Jaffna who was a civil servant in Madras. Edgar Thurston thought it appropriate to quote the following excerpt from that work, in the section dealing with the Vellala caste in his ‘Castes and Tribes of South India’.

“Among the pure Tamils, the class most honoured was the Arivar or Sages. Next in rank to the Arivar were Ulavar or farmers. The Arivar were ascetics, but of men living in society the farmers occupied the highest position. They formed the nobility, or the landed aristocracy, of the country. They were also called Vellalar, the lords of the flood or karalar, lords of the clouds... The Chera, Chola and Pandyan kings and most of the petty chiefs of Tamilakam, belonged to the tribe of Vellalas.” (Thurston, 1906: p.367-368)

The efforts of the early Dravidian school of Tamil ‘historiography’ culminated in the work of [Maraimalai Atikal](#) – the founder of the Pure Tamil movement which became a powerful force in the anti-Hindi struggles from 1928 onwards. He published a book called, ‘Vellalar Nakareekam’ – The Civilisation of the Vellalas – in 1923. The book was a lecture he had given at the Jaffna Town Hall on January 1, 1922 on the ‘Civilization of the Tamils’ A contribution of Rs.200 was made in Jaffna towards the publication of the lecture, as a book. The Jaffna Vellala of that time saw his interests as being bound with that of his castemen in South India, who were attempting to rid themselves of the Sudra status assigned to them in the Varna hierarchy of caste by Brahmins.

However, Maraimalai Atikal had decided to publish it as a book in order to refute a claim in the caste journal of the Nattukottai Chetti community, that the Chetties did not marry among the Vellalas because they (the Vellalas) were Sudras. In the English preface to the work, Maraimalai Atikal says that his book

“is written in scrupulously pure Tamil style, setting forth at the same time views of a revolutionary character in the sphere of social religious and historical ideas of the Tamil people...In the first place attention is directed to Vellalas, the civilized agricultural class of the Tamils, and to their origin, and organization...it is shown that at a time when all the people except those who lived all along the equatorial regions were leading the life of hunters or nomads, these Vellalas attained perfection in the art of agriculture...and by means of navigation occupied the whole of India. When the Aryan hordes came from the north-west of Punjab and poured forth into the interior, it was the ten Vellala kings then ruling in the north that stopped their advance.”

Maraimalai Atikal goes on to claim that the eighteen Tamil castes were created by the Vellalas for their service; that



Professor Sunderam Pillai, 1855 - 1897



Maraimalai Atikal
1867 -1950

they (the Vellalas) were vegetarians fo the highest moral codes; that Saivism and the Saiva Siddhantha philosophy nurtured by the Vellalas for more than 3,500 years were the pre-Aryan religious heritage of the Tamils; that the classification of Vellalas as Sudras was the result of an insidious Aryan-Brahmin conspiracy. Maraimalai Atikal was also defending fellow Vellala Dravidian scholars and their claims against attacks and veiled criticisms of Brahmin Tamil academics, M.Srinivasa Aiyangar, a respected Brahmin Tamil scholar who had worked as an assistant to the superintendent of census for the Madras Presidency.

Mr. Stuart, had made a devastating attacking on the claims of the Dravidian school of Tamil historiography, which derived its authority from the ‘scientific’ philological works of Bishop Caldwell. He debunked the theory of the Caldwell-Vellala school that Tamil culture was constituted by the high moral virtues of an ancient race of peaceful cultivators, on the basis of what he had studied of the religion and culture of the Tamil country-side, as an officer of the census, and on the basis of ‘pure’ Tamil works that had been rediscovered towards the latter part of the 19th century.

Srinivasa Aiyangar noted in his ‘Tamil Studies’, “Within the last fifteen years a new school of Tamil scholars has come into being, consisting mainly of admirers and castemen of the late lamented professor and antiquary, Mr. Sunderam Pillai of Trivandrum.” Aiyangar argued that contrary to the claims of the new school, the Tamils were a fierce race of martial predators. He wrote,

“Again some of the Tamil districts abound with peculiar tomb stones called ‘Virakkals’ (hero stones). They were usually set upon graves of warriors that were slain in battle... The names of the deceased soldiers and their exploits are found inscribed on the stones which were decorated with garlands of peacock feathers or some kind of red flowers. Usually small canopies were put up over them. We give below a specimen of such an epitaph. A careful study of the Purapporul Venba Malai will doubtless convince the reader that the ancient Tamils were, like the Assyrians and the Babylonians, a ferocious race of hunters and soldiers armed with bows and lances making war for the mere pleasure of slaying, ravaging and pillaging. Like them the Tamils believed in evil spirits, astrology, omens and sorcery. They cared little for death. The following quotations from the above work will bear testimony to the characteristics of that virile race.

(1) Garlanded with the entrails of the enemies they danced with lances held in their hands topside down. (2) They set fire to the fertile villages of their enemies, and (3) plundered their country and demolished their houses. (4) The devil’s cook distributed the food boiled with the flesh of the slain, on the hearth of the crowned heads of fallen kings.

With these compare same passages from the Assyrian stories of campaigns: ‘I had some of them flapped in my presence and had the walls hung with their skins. I arranged their heads like crown... All his villages I destroyed, desolated, burnt; I made the country desert.’ And yet the early Dravidian are considered by Dr. Caldwell as the farmers of the best moral codes, and by the new school of non-Aryan Tamil scholars...”

Aiyangar even claims, “We have said that the Vellalas were pure Dravidians and that they were a military and dominant tribe. If so one could naturally ask, ‘How could the ancestors of peaceful cultivators be a war-like race?’” He argues that the etymology of the root Vel is connected to war and weapons, that it was not uncommon for cultivating castes to have been martial tribes in former days as in the case of the Nayar, the Pillai, the Bants, etc. He also cites an official census of the Tamil population in the Madras Presidency, which shows that Tamil castes with a claim to traditional marital status constituted twenty six percent of the total number of Tamils in the Presidency. (Srinivasa Aiyangar; 1915, pp.40-58)

Aiyangar's attack on the Dravidian theory of Caldwell and the Vellala propagandists had political undertones. Learned Brahmins of the day were acutely aware of the political interests that lay behind the claims of the early Dravidian school. Vellala Tamil revivalism and its idea of Dravidian uniqueness were closely related to the pro-British and collaborationist political organization that was formed in 1916, by the non-Brahmin elites of the Madras Presidency – the South Indian Liberal Federation. Its proponents were, therefore careful not to emphasise the narratives of the martial reputation of the Tamils that were embodied in the ancient 'high' Tamil texts or in the folk culture of rural Tamilnadu. (Tamil revivalism had been promoted by Protestant missionaries and British officials in the latter half of the 19th century, only in as much as it was seen to facilitate the social, economic and religious aims of demilitarizing Tamil society and diminishing the influence of Brahmins in it.)

This was done not only out of a desire to promote Vellala caste culture, as Tamil national culture, but also in conscious deference to the concerns of the Raj about the 'seditious' views of Tamil cultural revival that were being propagated by the 'terrorists' and their sympathisers which were aimed at stirring the "ancient martial passions" of the Tamils in general and the military castes in particular, by appealing to martial values inscribed in the caste traditions of the Maravar and linking them to a glorious past that had been sustained by, what according to them, was the unique and powerful Tamil martial tradition. The political life of Purananooru, the foundation text of Tamil militarism had been initiated by two Brahmins who were sympathisers of the Indian revolutionary movement at this juncture. (The one was the great Tamil poet Subramanya Bharathi; the other was the great Tamil scholar M.Raghava Aiyangar, the court pundit of the Marava kings of Ramnad.)

These concerns, had compelled the Raj to take lines of action aimed at the terrorists and the military castes. One, it carefully sifted through the Tamil revivalist propaganda of the suspected sympathisers of the terrorist movement, to charge them with sedition. Two, it introduced the Criminal Tribes Act of 1911, with the express objective of thoroughly obtaining knowledge of, supervising and disciplining the Kallar and Maravar who were classified as dacoits and thugs under this act. The political mobilization of the Tamil military castes began as reaction against this act. The political leadership of this mobilization was inspired by the militarism of the terrorists. Modern Tamil militarism as a political force emerged from this conjuncture.

As we shall see later, Karunanidhi, Thondaman, Kasi Anandan and Prabhakaran are all, in varying degrees, products of the notions of Tamilian identity which arose from this conjuncture. Students of Tamil ethno-nationalism's current phase will find that the martial narratives of Tamilian past and present are at work in two extremes of the Tamil political spectrum. Last month, an audio cassette was released in Jaffna by the LTTE and a commemoration volume was released in Singapore in Thondaman's honour. Both are politically conscious efforts to root two personalities and their nationalist projects, to what has been portrayed as the most powerful manifestation of the Tamil martial tradition – the Chola Empire.

The LTTE cassette evokes a glorious past associated with Prabhakaran's only nom de guerre, Karikalan – the founder of the Chola Empire. The commemoration volume, on the other hand seeks to emphasise the 'continuity' of a martial caste tradition between the leader of the CWC and the great general of the Chola Empire, Karunakara Thondaman. Thus the examination of Tamil militarism in this study is an exploration of the answer to the question – why does Tamil ethno-nationalism express itself thus and how does it sustain power to appeal to pan-Tamilian sentiments?

Letter of Correspondent R.B.Diulweva [Dehiwela] and Sivaram's response:

Martial Tamils [Lanka Guardian, September 1, 1992, p.24]

I read with wry amusement, and increasing bewilderment, Sivaram's curious assemblage of 'facts' about Tamil 'military' castes. The recluse in the Vanni, and his acolytes in the diaspora, should be grateful to the L[anka] G[uardian] for providing a platform for this skewed rewriting of history.

Some random reflections on Sivaram's thesis. Does he seriously believe that the buccaneering Portuguese had the time to indulge in sociological analysis of Tamil militarism (a la CIA) and strategically decide to erase/Vellalise the 'military' castes? This also applies to the Dutch and the Brits. Sivaram's overall picture is of a truly fantastic war sodden people imbibing blood thirstiness with their mothers' milk. Weren't the vast mass of Tamils peaceable farmers, fishermen, craftsmen? Or was their sole function to service these magnificent bravos? And whom did these 'military' castes fight during the eras of peace when Tamil civilization, in its truest sense, flourished?

Another fact for Sivaram. One of his 'military' castes the Maravar has made a contribution to the Sinhala language. To this day, a 'marava-raya' is synonymous with 'thug'. This is, probably, all that these 'warriors' were!.

D.P.Sivaram states:

I suggest that Mr.Diulweva go on reading before he finally decides whether it is skewed history or not. He should also study Prof.K.Kailasapathy's Tamil Heroic Poetry, which describes an earlier phase of the culture that I have tried to analyse. He might find the overall picture there even more gruesome.

I understand Mr.Diulweva's concerns given the current situation of the country, and hence his wish to think that the vast mass of Tamils were peaceable farmers. His wish and concern have had precedents in the British era. As for the sociological analysis of the buccaneering Portuguese, it was based on Prof.Tikiri Abeyasinghe's 'Jaffna under the Portuguese' (discussed there in detail). I deal with the Maravar in as much as they were a political fact in the rise of Tamil nationalism. A write up in the Sunday Times of 23.8[Aug].[19]92 by its Madras correspondent refers to the political influence of one Mr.Natarajan who he says "belongs to the powerful Thevar (the caste title of the Maravar) community in southern Tamilnadu." Mr.Diulweva will find, if he takes a closer look at the politics of Tamilnadu, still an important political fact.

Selected Writings by Dharmeratnam Sivaram (Taraki)

On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay Part 9: Bharathy and the Legitimation of Militarism

Lanka Guardian, [pp.6-8]
[prepared by [Sachi Sri Kantha](#), for electronic record]
1 October 1992



One of the main figures of the Indian revolutionary movement in Tamilnadu at the turn of the [20th] century was [Maha Kavi Subramaniya Bharathy](#). One of its sympathisers was the Tamil scholar M.Raghava Aiyangar, who was the court pundit of the Maravar kings of Ramnad. Subramaniya Bharathy has been one of the most powerful influences in Tamilian cultural and political life in the twentieth century. The fundamental idea of modern Tamil militarism – that the Tamils were a martial race and that the rejuvenation of their martial traditions is necessary for national liberation, was enunciated by these two Brahmins in the first decade of the twentieth century.

This idea has informed Tamil scholarship as well as the narratives of militant Tamil nationalism since then. It has been reproduced in many forms but its fundamental structure has remained the same. This narrative has been a basis of the vocabulary of Tamil nationalism in

- (a) The Indian revolutionary movement in Tamilnadu,
- (b) The Indian National movement in Tamilnadu,
- (c) The DK's secessionist and Anti-Hindi movement,
- (d) Caste revivalist movements in Tamilnadu,
- (e) The DMK,
- (f) The Federal Party in Sri Lanka, and
- (g) The armed Tamil separatist movement in the North and East of Sri Lanka.

Current (establishment) literature in the West on the use of history in national liberation organizations and terrorist groups, refers to what these organizations endeavour to disperse among their members and their people as 'the' authentic reading of the nation's past and present, as projective narratives which are, it is claimed, "stories that not only recall the past, but also teach how to behave in the present."

"Narratives of this sort tell individuals how they would ideally have to live and die in order to contribute properly to their collectivity and its future."

It has been argued in an analysis which draws attention to the frequent use of these projective narratives by the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia, that the members of the Army are not marginal outcasts from Armenian society, but that projective narratives transform them into "paradigmatic figures of its deepest values." (Gerald Cromer: 1991). The projective narratives that shaped militant Tamil nationalism and its idea of national liberation were formulated as a reassertion of feudal Tamil militarism and its traditional cultural hegemony in Tamil society.

This was so because they were essentially linked to the Indian revolutionary movement's idea of reviving India's traditional martial heritage as a precondition for national liberation. The importance of chiefly Bharathy and to lesser extent Raghava Aiyangar in the rise of modern Tamil militarism lies in the fact that they initiated a political reading of the ancient Tamil text Purananooru, in particular- an anthology of predominantly heroic poems – and a heroic Tamilian past in general, as basis of a Tamilian concept of national liberation. Their reading was conceived as part of the Indian revolutionary movement's ideology of national liberation through armed insurrection.

It must be emphasised that they saw the Tamil martial tradition from a pan-Indian perspective. To them the heroic Tamil past was a reflection of a great Indian martial heritage, whereas the Dravidian school vehemently rejected the pan-Indian perspective as a myth promoted by Brahmin interests. Therefore the politics of the views propagated by

Bharathy and Raghava Aiyangar have to be located at two levels; the pan-Indian and the south Indian.

At the first [pan-Indian] level, the following factors have to be considered; (a) British recruitment policy and its theory of martial races, (b) the cultural and political reaction to it among the educated Indian middle classes in Bengal and west India., (c) the kshatriya revivalism of Bal Ganghadar Thilak, (d) Japan's victory over Russia in 1905.

At the south Indian level, the following factors shaped the two men's thinking; (a) the movement for elevating the status of Tamil language, (b) the rediscovery of the Sangam anthologies, (c) the status and role of feudal Tamil militarism in Tamil society.

The shift in [military] recruitment to the northwest of the subcontinent toward the latter part of the 19th century was accompanied by the martial races theory which sought to elaborate the idea as to why some Indian people – Rajputs, Sikhs, Punjabi Muslims – were martial, while others – Marathas, Bengali upper castes, Mahars, Telugus and Tamils who had once been the predominant groups of the British Indian army – were not martial.

Lord Roberts of Kandahar, the commander in chief of the Indian army, 1885-1893, had made disparaging remarks about the martial character of the Tamils [and] Telugus who had once formed the backbone of the army's largest group of infantry units.

“Each cold season I made long tours in order to acquaint myself with the needs and capabilities of the men of the Madras Army. I tried hard to discover in them those fighting qualities which had distinguished their forefathers during the wars of the last and the beginning of the present century...and I was forced to the conclusion that the ancient military spirit had died in them.”

It was reasoned that long years of peace in the south had had a softening effect on them. There were protests and petitions from the de-recruited classes including Tamils and Telugus. A need to prove their ancient martial character arose among many classes that were thus affected.

At a Congress session in 1891, two Telugu Brahmins invoked the ancient Hindu law giver Manu in support of their contention that they were traditionally a war-like race, to refute Lord Robert's alleged slights against the Telugu people. These sentiments had been already exacerbated by the Arms Act of 1878 which prohibited Indians from possessing arms without permission. This was seen as a loss of self respect. Raja Rampal Singh protested against it at the second session of the National Congress in 1886,

“...But we cannot be grateful to it (the British Government) for degrading our natures, for systematically crushing out of us all martial spirit, for converting a race of soldiers into a timid flock of quill driving sheep.” (Cohen; 1990, chapters 1, 2)

The Marathas had also been particularly affected by these developments. Thilak arose as a national leader among them. He propagated the view that the kshatriya class which had been disfranchised by the British had to rise again. They were the traditional defenders of the realm and internal order. National emancipation could be achieved through the rejuvenation of that class and the traditional Indian social order.

Thilak's ideas played an important role in the rise and dispersion of the Indian revolutionary movement. The movement got a big boost in 1905, when Japan defeated Russia. The victory demonstrated a point – that Asian

martial spirit could prevail over European military might. Hence, for the revolutionaries (the Raj classified them as terrorists) India's emancipation lay in the revival of its traditional martial values. The impact of Japan's victory over Russia on the Indian revolutionary movement in Bengal and west India has been examined (in detail, in Dua: 1966).

At this time Subramaniya Bharathy was the editor of a nationalist Tamil paper called, 'India'. He was an ardent follower of Thilak and the revolutionary movement and was one of the few in Madras who were bold enough to propagate its ideas through his paper. On Thilak's fiftieth birthday, he wrote an editorial (14.7[July] 1906):

"The present condition of the country makes it necessary to have Veera Poojai (hero worship)...Veera Poojai is indispensable for a country's progress. The people of our country who have always keenly observed Veera Poojai, should not be slack at a time when it is most needed."

A note in the paper says that, Thilak's birthday was celebrated in Madras at Bharathy's house at Lingaya Chetty street and that a pooja had been held for India's martial goddess – Veera Sakthi – Bhavani (the goddess worshipped by the Maratha warrior king Shivaji). The revolutionary movement was spreading the Shivaji festival in many parts of India to rekindle the martial spirit which according to them had been systematically crushed out of the Indian nation and were establishing gymnasiums to improve its physical power.

Bharathy wrote an editorial titled in English as, 'The Outrage of the Arms Act', reminiscent of Raja Rampal Singh's outburst – "An evil Viceroy called Lord Lytton introduced this Act in 1878. The people should have opposed it then. It is totally against divine law to make a great country's people cowards who cannot wield weapons." (1.12[Dec] 1906)

Again he wrote an editorial titled, 'Are Indians Cowards?', on Japan's martial example. "A few Asiatics soundly beat hundreds and thousands of Russians. This is enough to show the valour of the Asians. The warrior's heaven – Veera Swarkam – is better." (29.12 [Dec.] 1906)

He [Bharathy] was opposed to those who upheld the value of English education. The ideas of the revolutionary movement had to be rooted in Tamil culture and its deepest values; and they had to be spread among the ordinary Tamil masses. This could be done according to him only by adopting a simple style of writing Tamil. This view underlies his poems and songs through which he propagated the idea of the rejuvenation of the Tamil martial spirit as part of the India's heroic reawakening and liberation.

"Amongst us, the Tamils, manliness is gone, valour is gone. We don't have a country. We don't have a government. Will Saraswathy (the goddess of learning) appear in this country in such a situation?"

"Tamil Nadu has not lost its wealth, independence, physical strength, and mental strength and has descended to a low state. Hence good poets disappeared from this country."

In his Puthiya Aathisoody (a book of moral aphorisms for children), he wrote, "Dismiss fear. Do not fail in courage. Learn the art of War."

Thilak's idea that the kshatriya class of India that had been disfranchised by the British, had to reassert itself in the struggle for the nation's emancipation was more real and immediate to Bharathy, because he came from a Brahmin family from Tinnevelly in the deep south, that had served the Poligars of Ettayapuram. He was hence, acutely aware of the traditional status of the Maravar in Tamil society and what had befallen them under the British. The great

famine of 1876 had brought untold suffering upon the people in the deep south and had led to a further decline in the standing of the poorer sections of the Maravar. They were constantly harassed by the police which was formed by Brahmins and other non-military castes.

The poet, a Brahmin who had given up the holy thread, hated Brahminism and his castemen who were servile to the English. To Bharathy, the kshatriyas of Tamilnadu were the Maravar. (This view seems to have been common to Brahmin families that had served the Marava chieftains and kings. See also, Dirks; 1982; p.662). In a note to his 'Paanjali Sapatham', he says,

"Maram means valour – Veeram. Maravar are kshatriyar. Understand that, in our country, the class that is known now as Maravar are kshatriyar."

His 'Maravan's song' (Maravan Paattu) relates the predicament of the traditional Tamil military castes under British rule and urges the reassertion of the Maravar, and their martial reputation. He portrays his own castemen in the police as a wretched and greedy lot, abject before the English master, framing criminal cases against the Maravar and fleecing them under various pretexts.

"Alas, we have to dig the soil today to earn our wage. The might of our swords and spears are gone! A bad name has come upon us in this world... The times when we made war with bows, blowing our chanks, are now a thing of the past... Can we bring disgrace upon our great warriors of yore by selling our honour? Aren't we the valourous Maravar? Should we lead this useless life anymore?"

Thus the revival of traditional Tamil militarism – in its caste and broader cultural forms – was essentially linked to Bharathy's project of propagating and kindling Tamil nationalism among the masses as a means of national liberation. The project has continued to be at the centre of all political schemes that have invoked Tamil nationalism from his time.

Bharathy's convictions received a boost in September 1906, at the time when the activities of the revolutionaries were gathering momentum. It came from a talk given by U.V.Saminatha Aiyer on a poem from the Purananooru – an anthology of heroic Tamil poetry. U.V.Saminatha Aiyer, after many years of research, had discovered and published the Purananooru in 1894. It was considered to be one of the most ancient Tamil works. It is said that "the publication of Purananooru created a revolution in Tamilian thinking." (P.S.Mani; p.105. Bharathiyanum Thamil Pulavarhalum, 1981, Madras. "They – the Tigers – are writing the new Purananooru", Ulahath Thamilar, 1.5[May].1992)

The talk gave Bharathy what he was looking for – a sound basis for propagating the idea of reviving the martial spirit among the Tamils to achieve national liberation through violence. He wrote an editorial on the subject titled in English as 'Ancient Tamil Lady of Ever Sacred Memory', on 8.9[Sept].1906. The political life of Purananooru, the foundation text of Tamil militarism, begins in this editorial.

It was a time when very few Tamils knew about Purananooru or the Sangam corpus. He says,

"A Tamil work called Purananooru was written many centuries ago. It does not, like later works, relate Puranic fables. It tells of the condition of Tamilnadu in those times, the wars of the kings and many other natural events. A poem from this work was expounded by U.V.Saminatha Aiyer of the Madras Presidency College. There are some, who out of ignorance think that there is no use in learning Tamil and that it cannot inspire patriotism. Aiyer spoke on this poem to refute their erroneous notions.

The poem is about the mother of a warrior (Rana Veeran). The woman had sent her son to the battle field, thinking that he will either die in war for his mother country or come back victorious. A liar came and told her that her son had taken fright and run away from the battle field. On hearing this the old woman exclaimed, ‘Did I bring up a coward to whom his life was more important than the love for his nation? I shall go to the battle front and if he has done so, I shall hack these breasts that gave him suck and will die there.’

Determined thus the old woman went to the field and was overjoyed to find her son slain in battle. She was at peace, because her son had given his life for his motherland. The woman’s name is not known now. But only if Lord Isvara blesses the continent of Baratha with many such mothers in these times, a solution to all our problems could be found.”

Bharathy draws a parallel here to the story of a Japanese mother who had lost all her sons in the war but was found crying that she did not have more sons to send to the battle front. There were books on Japan’s victory over Russia like, ‘The Russo-Japanese War’ in circulation, particularly among the revolutionaries and their sympathisers at that time. The theme of the heroic Japanese mothers who nurtured the martial spirit in their sons during the 1905 war was emphasised in these books.

Japan’s victory over Russia had inspired another nationalist minded Brahmin to write Parani poems (A form of Tamil war poetry sung for a warrior who slays 1,000 elephants in battle) hailing its martial example. This was M.Raghava Aiyangar, who was the editor of the Madurai Thamil Sangam’s journal ‘Senthamil.’

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3. Nicholas B.Dirks; The pasts of a Palayakarar – The ethnohistory of a South Indian Little King. Journal of Asian Studies, vol.XLI, no.4, August 1982. “Many of my informants (Brahmins as well as Maravars and Kallars) have told me that the Mukkulathors – the three Tamil military castes – are really the kshatriyas of Southern India.” Dirks deals with the Poligars (Palayakarars) of Othumalai, who belong to the Kondayam Kottai subsection of the Maravar, the group to which most of the Southern feudal military chieftains belonged. The Sethupathys – the kings of Ramnad – belong to the subsection known as Sembu Maravar.
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Letter of Correspondent C.R.A.Hoole [Ontario, Canada]:

Tamil Military Caste

[Lanka Guardian, September 15, 1992, p.12]

D.P.Sivaram's claim that Bishop Caldwell's writing served to "demilitarize Tamil society" (August 1) discloses a fixation on Tamil martial prowess and warrior bravery. The fixation is more explicit in Mr.Sivaram's account of the 'Tamil military castes' (May 1 – July 1). The account cannot however be taken as an accurate reading of Tamil history. It may be better understood as a charter, providing historiographical legitimacy for the present-day glorification of warrior-heroes who earn fame and honour through gruesome deeds.

Crucial to his argument is the assertion that the pre-British society was dominated by martial values and only subsequently "under active British patronage the Vellala caste established its dominance, and its culture became representative and hegemonic in Tamil society" (May 15, p.18). Against this view, it may be pointed out that centuries before the Bishop launched his so-called pacification programme, the brahmans and their Vellala allies initiated a process of agrarian expansion that not only brought large tracts of land under cultivation, but its people under the sway of brahmanical values (B.Stein, 1980; B.Beck, 1979). Kallar and Maravar during the Chola times progressively converted their lands to peasant agriculture and also adopted Vellala titles. This process has been described as "Vellalization" or "brahmanization" and gave rise to the Tamil proverb, "Kallar, Maravar and Agambediyar becoming fat, turn into Vellalar". The caste society as we know it today, began to emerge from process in the tenth century, with its left-hand and right-hand structural divisions.

It would then follow that the dominant values of the Tamil society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are typically caste values that is, "hierarchy" and "consensus" – in opposition to "conflict" (M.Moffat, An Untouchable Community in South India, 1979). In this context, the Kallar and Maravar who continued to inhabit the remaining marginal or peripheral tracts at this time, may be seen to represent a classical ethosthat was receding into oblivion.

There is no doubt that the Kallar and Maravar remained an irritant to the British Raj, as they had been to the Chola and Pandya overlords. On the other hand because they existed outside the larger caste society, neither a Kallan nor a Maravan could during the time become a paradigmatic figure worthy of imitation by the vast majority of the Tamils. In short, Mr.Sivaram has exaggerated their influence on the Tamil society during that period.

Letter of Correspondent T.Vanniasingham [Canada]:

Maravar Militarism [Lanka Guardian, October 15, 1992, p.21]

Please permit me to say a few words about Mr.Sivaram's essays on Tamil military castes. In his account he is illegitimately glorifying them. He seems to be implying that they were treated unambiguously with awe and veneratio, at the time of their exploits. Tamil literary documents of the period are not reliable on this score. Poets and bards were hired-hands in the service of chiefs and could be paid to praise and exaggerate their struggles and victories. In any case there are other Tamil poems that portray the Maravar as blood-thirsty savages, uncouth, undisciplined and lawless who lived by robbing unarmed travellers. The Silapathikaram for instance mentions them as practising "the glorious art of stripping travellers of their wealth – for the brave Maravar virtue lies in the heartlessness of plunder."

There is no doubt that they established kingdoms of their own – and at other times they were mercenaries in the pay of other kingdoms. In fact there were many ruling castes in ancient Tamil society. The Maravar were one such group.

These many castes were always in contention for power and the Maravar won, at times. They were not overpowering and dominant all the time and over the entire territory. In this respect, Mr.Diulweva's claims (Lanka Guardian, 1 Sept.'92) were quite correct. In fact it is possible to show that they were a "fierce maravar tribe – who prefer to die a glorious death on the battle field to a village funeral pyre," as the Silapadikaram puts it, they lacked a theory of government and civil society. For them a civil society is not something that people live in but something that one robs and devours because the Maravar never produce anything. Long before the British came to suppress them, they had shown an inability to govern a civil society of many castes for any extended period of time. Governance needs intelligence, political wisdom, historical knowledge, forebearance and a capacity for trust, all of which, if we are to judge by the descriptions in the ancient Tamil texts, the Maravar conspicuously lack.

A readiness to kill and be killed, as we know only too well, is not the way to create a civilized society.

Selected Writings by Dharmeratnam Sivaram (Taraki)

On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay Part 10: Warrior Sons and Mothers

Lanka Guardian, [pp.17-18 and 20]
[prepared by [Sachi Sri Kantha](#), for electronic record]
1 November 1992



The Madurai Thamil Sangam was established by Pandithurai Thevar in 1901 with the assistance of his cousin Bhaskara Sethupathy, who was the Raja of Ramnad at that time. The institution and its journal – the Senthamil – played an important role in what could be termed the Tamil renaissance in the first two decades of the twentieth century among the Tamils of south India and Sri Lanka. Its importance also lies in the fact that it created a class of Tamil pundits through a well organized and prestigious system of examinations at a time when strong objections were being raised against creating a Chair for Tamil, in the University of Madras.

The pundits qualified by the Madurai Thamil Sangam in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka have also been instrumental in shaping the vocabulary of Tamil identity when Tamil nationalism began to constitute itself as a political force on both sides of the Palk Straits. The Sangam was conceived as a nationalist project by Pandithurai Thevar who announced and took up the task of its formation at the Madras sessions of the Congress in 1901. Thevar upheld the view that "the love for one's language is the basis of patriotism and the love for one's religion." (Speech made at Tuticorin, quoted in P.S.Mani, p.39). Thevar's desire to establish the Sangam was also linked to the traditional role of the Maravar and Kallar kings and chieftains of Tamil Nadu as the patrons of Tamil poets and pundits, despite the powerful inroads made by Sanskrit over the centuries.

Most of the Tamil texts that impelled twentieth century renaissance were unearthed from collections of manuscripts preserved by families of traditional Tamil poets and scholars who had been patronised by Tamil poligars and kings. Thevar appointed R.Raghava Aiyangar who was the court pundit of the Sethupathys, as editor of the Sangam's

journal 'Senthamil' in 1901. His cousin, M.Raghava Aiyangar succeeded him as editor in 1904 and served for eight years. M.Raghava Aiyangar and his cousin belonged to a family of Vaishnavite Brahmins who had attached themselves to the Maravar kings of Ramnad from the eighteenth century. The family produced many Tamil and Sanskrit scholars who were court pundits and ministers to the Sethupathys and the nobles of their clan. M.Raghava Aiyangar's father was a renowned Tamil scholar in the court of Ponnuchami Thevar, the brother of the Ramnad king Muthuramalinga Sethupathy (1862-1873). Ponnuchamy Thevar was [Arumuga Navalar](#)'s patron in Tamil Nadu. Aiyangar's father died when he was young and was looked after by Ponnuchami Thevar's son Pandithurai Thevar.

Thus, Aiyangar's life was bound with that of the Sethupathy clan of Marava rulers. Later in his life, he wrote a book in appreciation of Thevar and his father called, Senthamil Valartha Thevarhal (The Thevars who nurtured Sen Thamil). Aiyangar dedicated two of his most popular books to Bhaskara Sethupathy and Pandithurai Thevar. His involvement with the Indian nationalist movement was therefore closely related to the interests and perceptions of Thevar who was bestirred by the ideas of the revolutionaries and the Swadeshi movement. The Sethupathys had been resentful of the fact that they were coerced by the British to hand over the vast and profitable trade with Ceylon and Bengal. Thevar therefore was attracted by the Swadeshi movement's campaign to rejuvenate local industry and commerce to undermine the hold of British capital on India. The revolutionaries were calling for the revival of the disfranchised kshatriya classes of India. The Senthamil incorporated these sentiments and ideas into its projects for Tamil renaissance.

Thevar formed the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company with [V.O.Chidamparam Pillai](#) in 1907, to break the British monopoly on the profitable Colombo-Tuticorin steamer service. Chidamparam Pillai was closely associated with members of the revolutionary movement in Tamil Nadu at that time. The company resolved in one of its articles of incorporation that it would contribute one percent of its monthly earnings to the Madurai Thamil Sangam, as long as it existed (Annual Report of the Sangam, 1907, pp.7-8). Aiyangar also contributed to the nationalist cause by buying a Rs.100 share in the company. The main financial assistance to the Sangam at this juncture came from Thondaman – the Kallar caste king of Pudukottai, who was its permanent patron, the Zamindar of Singam Patty (Maravar) and a Kallar caste leader called Gopalsamy Rajaliar, who had succeeded in a campaign with Thevar's assistance to alter his caste name from the derogatory Kallan to a more respectable form Kallar (Annual Report of Sangam, 1907). The Dravidian school of Tamil studies on the other hand was keen to show its loyalty to the Raj and represented Vellala caste interests.

It was in this context that M.Raghava Aiyangar's Tamil nationalist project took shape. He conceived of a martial heritage that was unique to the Tamil country constituted by the Chera, Chola and Pandya kingdoms in South India, and was - according to him - far superior to the military powers of north Indian peoples. He, an erudite Tamil scholar, skillfully melded his politics into a compelling representation of a heroic Tamil past.

The politicisation of Aiyangar's reading of the Tamil past begins with the event that kindled the revolutionary movement in 1905 – the victory of Japan over Russia. Japan's example was proof that India's traditional material values could prevail over British arms. The victory was hailed by those who subscribed to the ideas of Thilak's militarism. Aiyangar wrote Parani poems (a form of Tamil heroic poetry to celebrate the victory of a warrior who slays 1,000 elephants in the battle) exalting Japan's military might in the Sangam's journal 'Senthamil'. In 1907, when the activities of the revolutionary movement and the Swadeshi movement were gathering momentum, he wrote an editorial essay on 'Warrior Mothers' (Veerath Thaimar). The ideological agenda for what has been described as the 'Mother politics' of militant Tamil nationalism was set forth in this essay. He wrote,

"Although there may be other reasons for the victory of the Japanese over the Russians, more numerous and

belonging to a larger country, the main reason is the martial training given [to] them by their parents from childhood...the valour and patriotisms of Japanese mothers can be seen in the volumes called 'The Russo-Japanese War'. These things may appear strange in our times but if we examine our history we will find such warrior mothers and their valorous children numerous...In ancient Tamil texts like [Purananooru](#), the martial theme predominates. It should be noted how the mothers of that era created great warriors."

The essay is based on [heroic poetry](#) of the Moothinmullai category found in the Purananooru and the Purath-thirattu. Moothinmullai is a category in the poetics of codified Tamil martial culture in which the culmination [of] a woman's motherhood is portrayed as the heroic martyrdom of her warrior son in battle. The mothers urge their sons to die valiantly in war. Aiyangar contrasts a Moothinmullai poem in which the warrior's mother says her womb is the lair of the Tiger, who could be found only in battle fields, with another poem of the category in which a mother whose son has failed to attain martyrdom in battle, exclaims in anguish that she would cut under her womb that give birth to a coward.

Aiyangar notes that the earliest Tamil grammar – the [Tholkappiyam](#) – defines and names the poetic theme of the mother who commits suicide on hearing her son's lack of valour in the battle field. ('These mothers belonged to Maravar clans', he says. The Maravar are matrilineal.) He says that the warriors brought forth by these mothers made Tamil Nadu glorious in the Sangam era, in which "one does not hear of north Indian kings invading Tamil Nadu, but only the victories of Tamil kings who fought the northerners. This was so because of the greatness of Tamil martial might." He concludes that the decline of the Tamils was the results of the decline of what he calls Thamil Veeram (Tamil martial prowess).

[Subramanya Bharathi](#) saw immense political value in the essay for propagating the ideas of the revolutionary movement's militarism among the Tamils. He serialized the essay in his paper 'India', and urged his readers to popularise it among their friends, relatives and 'women at their homes'. The essay was used by Bharathy as an instrument for rekindling the martial ethos among the Tamils to achieve national liberation through armed insurrection. Bharathy and [V.O.Chidamparam Pillai](#) wrote to Aiyangar, saluting the nationalist spirit inspired [by] his essays.

The politics of the Thamil Sangam was muted next year, when the Swadesh Steam Navigation company was crushed following riots against the British at Tuticorin and Tinnevelly. V.O.Chidamparam Pillai and the revolutionary leader Subramaniya Siva were arrested and imprisoned. The publisher of Bharathy's paper 'India' was also arrested on sedition charges. Bharathy became an exile in the French colony of Pondicherry.

Nevertheless, Aiyangar developed the theme of a Tamil martial tradition that was superior to the north, into one of the most persistent and characterising narratives of militant Tamil nationalism – the Seran Senguttuvan legend of the epic Silapathigaram. His belief that the decline of the Tamil martial tradition caused the decline of the Tamil nation has been echoed in every Tamil nationalist project since his time. Raghava Aiyangar lamented the decline of martial values in Tamil society, for he saw himself essentially as a loyal Brahmin of one of the oldest ruling Maravar clans of Tamil Nadu. His Tamil nationalist project was rooted in that self-perception.

Notes

(1) Recent gender-oriented critique of the LTTE fails to take note of the fact that the Moothinmullai Mother is a

leitmotif in the structuring and representation of the Tamil nationalist project. Hence in the BBC documentary on the Tigers – Suicide Killers – the Black Tiger Miller's mother is presented to the TV crew as a woman who feels proud of her son's heroic martyrdom in the suicide attack on the Nelliady, Sri Lankan army camp in 1987. The LTTE here is reproducing a fundamental structure of representing Tamilian identity. C.S.Lakshmi has examined the role of the concept of the heroic mother in the militant Dravidian movement and its strategy of mobilising women. She, however, fails to take note of the politics of Aiyangar and Bharathy and the impact of the Russo-Japanese war on them in the genesis of this concept. C.S.Lakshmi; Mother, Mother-community and Mother-politics in Tamil Nadu. Economic and Political Weekly, October 1990.

(2) [For] the role of the Sethupathys and Marava chieftains in the promotion of Tamil literature, see Sangath Thamilum Pitkalath Thamilum, U.V.Saminatha Aiyer, 1949, Kabir Press, Madras.

(3) Senthamil Valartha Thevarhal, M.Raghava Aiyangar; 1948, D.G.Gopalapillai Co., Tiruchi.

(4) Aiyangar was held in great esteem by the Tamil elite of Colombo and Jaffna. [Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan](#) invited him to lecture in Jaffna. One V.J.Thambi Pillai translated his 'Velir Varalaru' and published it in the Journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Ceylon. K.Srikanthan gave an award to his work 'Tholkappiya Araichi'. One of the earliest modern historians of Jaffna, A.Moothothambi Pillai, who was a contributor to the Sangam's journal Senthamil reflected Aiyangar's thesis in his Jaffna history, when he lamented the decline of Jaffna's martial values which according to him had flourished under the ruler Sankili. Moothothambi Pillai, 1912, 'History of Jaffna'.

(5) 'Siranjeevi'; 1981. 'Sethupathikal Varalaaru' (History of Sethupathys), Jeevan Press, Madras.

Selected Writings by Dharmeratnam Sivaram (Taraki)

On Tamil Militarism - a 11 Part Essay

Part 11: The legend of Cheran Senguttuvan

Lanka Guardian, [pp.15-16]

[prepared by Sachi Sri Kantha, for electronic record]

15 November 1992

[together with [Post Script by Sachi Sri Kantha](#) on the Significance of Sivaram's study on the Maravar Caste and Tamil Militarism, 6 May 2005]



“The lines of a song in today’s ceremony touched my heart. The lines refer to the Tamil flag which fluttered on the Himalayas. Although this may be a thing of the past, history can be re-established. Today this country is at war because the youth of this area were denied opportunities in education and culture...Our youth have not only done well in education but have shown that they have the self respect to achieve their aims through armed struggle. If nothing is done towards finding a settlement to the crisis in the north-east, the history related in the lines of that song will be reasserted.” - Joseph

Pararajasingham, MP for Batticaloa, speaking at a school function on 26.9[Sept]’92 (reported in the Virakesari of 1.10[Oct].’92

The song referred to by the member of parliament is from an MGR film. The lines of the song about which the MP speaks, are “I see that era when Cheran’s flag fluttered on the Himalayas.”*[[see below the foot-note by Sachi Sri Kantha](#)]. Joseph’s speech and MGR’s song invoke one of the most powerful narratives of modern Tamil nationalism – the conquest of north India by the kings of the three Tamil dynasties, the Cheras, Cholas and the Pandyas, which was accomplished by imprinting the Bow (Chera) or Tiger (Chola) or Pandya Fish (Pandya) emblems on the Himalayas.

The legend of Cheran Senguttuvan is the dominant episode of this narrative. Its political life in the Tamil nationalist project in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka has been more tenacious than the Dutugemunu – Elara episode in the narrative of Sinhala Buddhism’s struggle against the ‘South Indian Tamil threat’.

The legend of Cheran Senguttuvan, as we shall see later, was used by the Dravidian movement for drawing a compelling characterization of its anti-Hindi agitation. The legend forms the third part of the epic [Silappathikaram](#), which was written by Ilango Atikal, Seran Senguttuvan’s brother – a Jain ascetic.

It relates the story of Kannaki who became the goddess Pattini. The epic is divided into three parts (kaandam), named after the capitals of the Chera, Chola and Pandya kingdoms; Vanji, Puhar and Madurai. Unlike the heroic Sangam poetry which preceded it, the Silappathikaram speaks for the first time about a Tamil Nadu as such, constituted by the three kingdoms, distinguished by a martial tradition superior to that of north India. It portrays the three dynasties conquering the north and imprinting their emblems on the Himalayas, together and separately. The Pandyan king who mistakenly causes the beheading of Kannaki’s husband, Kovalan, bears the title ‘He who overran the Aryan army’ (Aryappadai kadantha).

M.Raghava Aiyangar wrote a book based on the third part of the epic – the Vanji kaandam – called, ‘Seran Senguttuvan’. It was dedicated to Pandithurai Thevar. A recent work on Aiyangar’s contribution says, “This was the first book to give the Vanji kaandam in prose. It was after this that many scholars studied the Vanji kaandam and wrote books...the book made everyone realise and appreciate the golden era of the Tamils.” (Annals of Tamil Research: M.Raghava Aiyangar Commemoration Volume, University of Madras, 1978, pp.18-19) The book went through four editions in the first two decades of its publication. “It can be said that after the appearance of this book, research on the Sangam period expanded. Many times it was made a text in the universities of Andhra, Mysore and Madras and in Ceylon, and is widely read.” (Araichi Thohuthi, 1938, p.20).

We examined the life and politics of M.Raghava Aiyangar in the last issue. As we pointed out there, Aiyangar’s idea of Tamilian renaissance differed from contemporaneous Indian nationalists in one important respect. Whereas the Indian nationalists who upheld the cause of Tamil culture and history, especially saw them from a pan-Indian perspective, Aiyangar’s writings emphasised a south Indian, Tamilian uniqueness and martial superiority. His most famous work ‘Seran Senguttuvan’ and the essay he wrote later to supplement and support it are clear attempts to establish and popularise that idea. Three reasons can be identified for his attitude.

The first, as we noted earlier, was his close relationship with the Marava rulers of Ramnad – the Sethupathys. The second is that he was a Vaishnavite Brahmin – the Indian National Congress was dominated in the Presidency of Madras by Saivite Brahmins. Many Vaishnavites have, as a result tended to sympathise with the Dravidian movement (Sivathamby, 1989). In a lecture delivered to the 23rd annual conference of the Madurai Tamil Sangam,

Aiyangar said,

“The three Tamil kings, the Cheras, Cholas and the Pandyas established their martial glory beyond Thamilaham (Tamil homeland) which lay between the Vengadam hills to the north and Comorin to the south; but their love for the Tamil speaking land was so great that they were not desirous of attaching lands where foreign languages are spoken, to Thamilaham...It will be appropriate to name the Madras Presidency as the Dravidian Province.” (Araichi Thohuthi; 1938, pp.318, 338)

The third reason is related to his stay in Kerala, as head of the Tamil department in the University of Trivandrum. Kerala was the ancient Chera kingdom. Aiyangar’s writings during his residence at Trivandrum attempt to place Kerala history and culture within the tradition of Thamilaham. The Maharaj of the Travancore state at that time, Sithirai Thirunal had told Aiyangar, “Malayalam is the Tamil language that bathed in the sea of Sanskrit” (R. Veerapathiran; 1978, p.38).

Some aspects of Kerala and Tamil literature and ‘Chera Venthar Seiyutt Kovai’ Aiyangar’s ‘gothra’(section) name was Aiyalarithan, a poet of the Chera dynasty, who wrote the Purapporul Venba Malai – a treatise on Tamil martial culture. One of his most controversial essays which resulted from his work at Trivandrum was on the kinship system of the Chera dynasty. All this stems from his work on Seran Senguttuvan. This book which has to be read in conjunction with his essay, ‘The conquest of the Himalayas by the Tamil Kings’ (Thamil Ventharin Imaya Padai-eduppu) attempted to ground the story of Senguttuvan in epigraphical literary evidence. The work seeks to establish a story of Senguttuvan, related in the Silappathikaram’s Vanji kaandam, as a historical truth. The book as a school and university textbook has left a deep imprint on Tamilian cultural-political vocabulary.

Annadurai, Karunanidhi, MGR and the speakers of the Federal Party have invoked the example of Seran Senguttuvan to bestir Tamil youth. The Silappathikaram portrays his expedition into north India as the assertion of Tamil military might over Aryan kings who had in their ignorance disparaged the martial prowess of southern Tamils.

Senguttuvan vows to defeat two Aryan kings, Kanakan and Vijayan (“They who could not hold their tongue”, says the epic) who had cast aspersions on what is called “Then Thamil Aatral” – south Tamil might. [Would] make them carry a stone hewn from the Himalayan mountain, back to Tamil Nadu for the deification of Kannaki as goddess Pattini. Senguttuvan is told, “You faced the thousand Aryan kings in combat on the day you bathed the goddess in the great flood of the Ganges...if you have decided on the expedition (to bring the stone), let the kings of the north fly the Bow, Tiger and Fish flags in their lands.”

Senguttuvan, says the epic, was born to Nedun-cheralathan, who bears the title, Imaya Varamban (He who has the Himalayas as his boundary) and the daughter of a Chola king; and as such, he is seen as representing a Tamilian unity. (The Silappathikaram says that Gajabahu of Lanka invoked the goddess Pattini at Senkuttuvan’s capital to come to his country and give her blessings on the day Senkuttuvan’s father Imaya Varamban’s birth was commemorated there.)

The conquest of the north and the Himalayas is a leitmotif in the Sangam anthologies which precede the Silappathikaram. (“The Aryans screamed out loud in pain when you attacked them.”, says a poem in the Sangam anthologies) The three parts of the epic emphasise the theme to glorify each dynasty. The first part refers to an expedition undertaken to the Himalayas by Thirumavalavan, who was known as Karikalan (Prabhakaran’s nom de guerre) – the founder of the Chola empire. He is shown as defeating the Maghadha, Avanti, and Vajra kingdoms. The second part speaks of the Pandyan who conquered the ‘newly arisen Himalayas’ when his ancient land of the

Kumari mountains and the Pahruli river were taken by the sea.

It is a theme in the inscriptions of the Chola empire at a later date. One Chola emperor takes on the title, the Conqueror of the Ganges. Minor poetry which arose after the decline of the Cholas praising military commanders and chieftains of the Tamil country also utilise the theme (Karumanikkan Kovai, Kalingathu Parani, etc.)

The leitmotif of the Tamil emblem on the Himalayas finds the most vivid expression in the story of Senguttuvan. Aiyangar takes it out of its epic context to emphasise a perception – that the Tamils were historically indomitable martial race. The story of Senguttuvan's expedition repeatedly lays stress on the what is referred to as South Tamil martial might. Aiyangar's later essay on the theme of Tamil expeditions into the north tried to prove again that these events were true on the basis of evidence, culled from the Imperial Gazeteer of India and the Hand Gazeteer of India.

In this essay, he [Aiyangar] argues that Asoka did not think of invading Tamil Nadu because he and other northern Aryan kings were aware and scared of the martial prowess of the ancient Tamils who before their times had invaded and defeated the north and imprinted their emblems on the Himalaya mountains.

The first Tamil king to imprint his emblem on the mountain was Karikalan; the names borne by parts of the Himalayas such as the Chola Pass and the Chola Range prove the Chola king's expedition is a historical fact, argued Aiyankar (Araichi Thohuti; 1938, p.184).

He did the 'academic' groundwork for the propagation of the narrative of Tamil military expeditions into the north as an expression of a unique and superior martial prowess and its symbol – the Tamil flag on the Himalayas. Dravidian propagandists and the politicians of the Federal Party transformed it into a nostalgic and powerful story of a golden era woven into the rhetoric and national liberation and youth mobilization.

Foot-Note by Sachi Sri Kantha

There is some confusion here, about which MGR song was played in the said school function. The quote of Joseph Pararajasingham, cited by Sivaram, states "The lines refer to the Tamil flag which fluttered on the Himalayas" but the exact Tamil words of the song were not quoted. But Sivaram has cited the lines as "I see that era when Cheran's flag fluttered on the Himalayas". I'm not sure whether Sivaram was a witness to that particular event of September 26, 1992.

If Sivaram's translated quote of the song is taken literally, then these lines appear in an MGR song: "Puthiya Vaanam – Puthiya Bhoomi enrum Puhal Mazhai Pozhikirathu" (Anbe Vaa movie).

But, an earlier MGR song by poet Kannadasan "[Achcham Enpathu Madamaiyada](#)" □□□□□□ □□□□□□ (Mannathi Mannan movie) provides a more fuller version of the Tamil militarism spirit, including the flag fluttering on the Himalayas. In my recent eulogy to Sivaram, I had presumed that the Kannadasan song in the Mannathi Mannan movie was the one which was referred to by Joseph Pararajasingham. Despite this confusion, there is no doubt that MGR made use of the powerful historical scenario of 'Cheran Tamil flag fluttering on the Himalayas', more than once in the lyrics of his movies.

Postscript (to the 11-part series) by Sachi Sri Kantha, 6 May 2005

The Significance of Sivaram's study on the Maravar Caste and Tamil Militarism

It's unfortunate that D.P.Sivaram's notable study [at least the published version in the Lanka Guardian journal] on the Maravar Caste and Tamil Militarism didn't have a proper closure in 1992. One is also not sure, why Sivaram didn't respond to two of his critics, namely Charles Hoole and T.Vanniasingham. May be, he might have felt that the expressed views of these two correspondents were half-baked and not worth a response.

From my readings of the academic contributions of late Charles R.A. Hoole (Principal, Baldaeus Theological College, Trincomalee; died on Sept.28, 2003), I have inferred that he subscribed to the tradition of the 19th century Christian evangelists, who came to the Tamil Nadu and Eelam to retrieve the 'savage natives from their sins and show the path to the Saviour'. Evangelists belonging to this clan [which included Charles Hoole's namesake Rajan Hoole and Rajani Thiranagama, among others] adhere to an obscurantist view that hardly any respectable culture and civilization among the Tamils existed, before the Christian missionary campaigns in the Indian subcontinent which began in earnest since early 1500s.

Correspondent T.Vanniasingham's thoughts [Lanka Guardian, Oct.15, 1992] also partially reflected this Christian evangelist position. His observation that "Poets and bards were hired-hands in the service of chiefs and could be paid to praise and exaggerate their struggles and victories" is somewhat naïve. The quatrain of 12th century epic poet [Kambar](#) cursing the Chola king with disdain,

"Mannavanum Neeyo – Vala Naadum Unatho – Unnai Arintho Thamizhai Othinene"
[Are you still a King? Is this wealthy land only yours? Did I study Tamil only to serve you?]

disproves the fallacy of correspondent Vanniasingham.

Maybe there indeed were poets and bards of mediocre quality who praised and exaggerated the 'glories' of their Chiefs. But, ranking poets and bards who had pride in their skills never stooped low for mundane benefits. Even in the 20th century, the ranking Tamil poets [[Subramaniya Bharati](#), [Bharathidasan](#), [Kannadasan](#) and [Kasi Anandan](#) comes to my mind] have shown us in their lives that they'd suffer poverty, indignity, humiliation, harassment and even prison terms; but they'd never lick the feet of power holders for mundane comforts. Of the four Tamil poets I've noted as examples, the last three were our contemporaries, and Kasi Anandan is still living.

Unlike the two [or three, if one includes R.B.Diuwewa] critics of Sivaram, few non-Tamil academics from USA who have made in-depth research on the Tamil literature and culture have provided corroborating reports to that of Sivaram. These have been compiled as '[Essays on South India](#)' (Asian Studies at Hawaii, No.15, University Press of Hawaii, 1975), edited by Burton Stein.

Thus, I provide excerpts below, from the thoughts of Clarence Maloney, George L.Hart III and Burton Stein, to supplement the research of Sivaram on Maravar caste. This is vital since I believe that Sivaram may not have had access to these reports, which preceded his 1992 study. The research ventures of George Hart and Burton Stein (1926-1996) in the 1960s and 1970s have questioned the credibility of the pro-Brahmanical views expressed by Nilakanta Sastri, the doyen of medieval Tamil studies in the first half of 20th century, and the author of [The Cholas](#) (Madras; University of Madras, 1935-1937) and [A History of South India from Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar](#) (Oxford University Press, 1966, 3rd edition).

George L. Hart III ['Ancient Tamil Literature: Its Scholarly Past and Future', pp.41-63]

"...A reading of any of Nilakanta Sastri's books discloses many facts concerning the daily life and culture of the Brahmins of South India, who were never more than a tiny (though important) minority, but it reveals an almost total lack of information concerning other segments of the South Indian population, even those high non-Brahman castes in whose hands the power has almost always been held. Ancient Tamil literature, on the other hand, was written by high-class poets who followed the model of the oral poetry of the Paanans and Paraiyans, men of the lowest castes, and is devoid of both high-class and Brahmanical bias. For this reason, it gives a more accurate picture of the social life and customs of the area to which it belongs than does any other classical literature of India." (pp.41-42)

"...It does not seem too much to hope that some day anthropologists will actually be able to trace the history of many Tamil castes. Unfortunately, most work done by anthropologists on modern Tamilnad has been devoted to the descendants of the uyarntor, or 'high ones'. Much more study needs to be devoted to the low castes, who are, after all, just as important for a proper understanding of the customs of the area as their higher counterparts." (p.58)

Burton Stein ['The State and the Agrarian Order in Medieval South India: A Historiographical Critique', pp.64-91]

I quote below two relevant paragraphs from Burton Stein's essay, but refrain from citing the complete references he had noted, only for reason of convenience. He also makes a passing mention of Polonnaruva inscription of Sri Lanka during the period of King Vijayabahu.

"The maintenance of Chola armies and the requirements of warfare as central state functions requiring a bureaucratic structure constitute the ultimate defensive redoubt of the conventional view of the state and the economy. Substantial chapters are devoted to territorial security and the organization of royal armies. Where a military unit is identified, it is assumed to be part of a central military organization. Thus the many velaikkarar military units of the period of Rajaraja are considered not only as the 'king's own' but as soldiers who have vowed to sacrifice their lives, by suicide, if necessary. The evidence upon which these conclusions about Chola armies are based is highly doubtful, and it is interesting to note that the early epigraphists Hultzsch, Krishna Sastri, and Venkayya held the view that the warriors called velaikkarar were probably made up of men from various occupational groups temporarily engaged in military activities.

Gopinatha Rao, Nilakanta Sastri, and Mahalingam have, in recent years, transformed these soldiers into a centrally recruited and controlled force completely devoted to the ruler. The implication of the revised view is that the Chola state had a monopoly of coercive power which at once required an effective mobilization and centralization of resources through a bureaucracy and, simultaneously, provided the 'central' government with a powerful instrument of coercion for that purpose – a large, royal, standing army. This proposition is indefensible and contrary to a considerable body of evidence that military power was distributed among many groups quite independent of the 'centralized monarchy'.

We have substantial evidence that mercantile groups maintained a formidable military capability which was required by the extensive, itinerant trade network of the age. Ayyavole inscriptions bear this out, as does the famous Polonnaruva inscription of Sri Lanka in the time of Vijayabahu (ca.1120) in which the Tamil idangai velaikkarar are referred to in association with the trade organization of the valanjiyar. References to kaikkolar velaikkarar have suggested that artisans too were capable of maintaining armed units, though Nilakanta Sastri has questioned this.

However, the major loci of military power were from those prosperous and populous tracts of agriculture throughout the Coromandel plain and parts of the interior uplands. The logic of resources – human and non-human – would make the dominant peasant population the major source of armed power. Local military authorities, local ‘chiefs’, were conspicuous in the early Chola period, before Rajaraja I, and once again attained high visibility in the thirteenth century when the Chola overlordship weakened. During the period of the great Cholas, from Rajaraja I through the time of Kulottunga I, these local chiefs almost disappear from view as that view is provided by inscriptions. This may, of course, mean that as a class of local leaders these warriors were eliminated much as the ‘poligars’ were reduced later by Tipu Sultan and the British. In a few cases there is evidence of this. However, it is much more likely that this level of leadership continued intact, but submerged beneath the surface of a society only partially revealed to us in the inscriptions of the age.” (pp.75-76)

Clarence Maloney [‘Archeology in South India: Accomplishments and Prospects’, pp.1-40]

“...The various Sangam literary works mention diverse occupations: kings, chieftains, scholars, sacrificial priests, purohita, poets, warriors, customs agents, shippers, foreign merchants, horse importers, blacksmiths, carpenters, potters, salt makers, pearl divers, caravan drivers, guards, tailors, fishers, dancers, drummers, plow farmers, shepherds, hunters, weavers, leather workers, and robbers. So far archeology has not produced evidence of well-developed handicrafts such as this list suggests. But for such a variety of occupations to be patronized there must have been an elite element leading an essentially urban way of life.

Named peoples may be considered as tribes, geographical or occupational castes, or ruling lineages: Kadambar, Velir, Oliyar, Aruvaalar, Maravar, Aayar, Kocar, Oviyar, Paratavar, Palaiyar, Velalar, Naagar and others. These functioned essentially as castes; both Palaiyar and Paratavar were living in Korkai under the Pandiyas. But caste as a structural system was not as rigidly hierarchical as it was to become in later medieval centuries.” (p.17)

Coda

By means of his 1992 study on the Marava caste, D.P.Sivaram has joined the elite circle of North American academics who preceded him in focusing their attention on other non-Brahmin Tamil castes. These academics include, Robert Hardgrave (Nadar caste), Brenda Beck (Kongu region’s Kavundar caste), Clarence Maloney (Paratavar caste), Bryan Pfaffenberger (Jaffna Vellalar caste) and Stephen Barnett (Thondai-mandala Kontaikatti Velalar Mudaliyar caste).

Sivaram’s study describing the paalayam and paalaya kaarar (‘Poligars’ of British) of Tinnevelly district in Tamil Nadu aroused my interest when it appeared in the Lanka Guardian, since one formative influence in my life - for a whole decade of 1960s - was from this region. The native address of my music teacher and flute guru, T.P.Jesudas [the Radio Ceylon flute artiste of 1950s and 1960s], which I remember very well is: Paalayam Kottai, Samathanapuram, Tirunelvelly district.

Last but not the least, though Sivaram did not have a Bachelor’s degree from a university, it is my view that for his published academic contribution on Marava caste, Sivaram truly deserves a posthumous honorary post-graduate degree [Master’s Degree at least] from a Sri Lankan university. And I’m sure that quite a number of Sri Lankans as well as non-Sri Lankans would concur with my suggestion.

